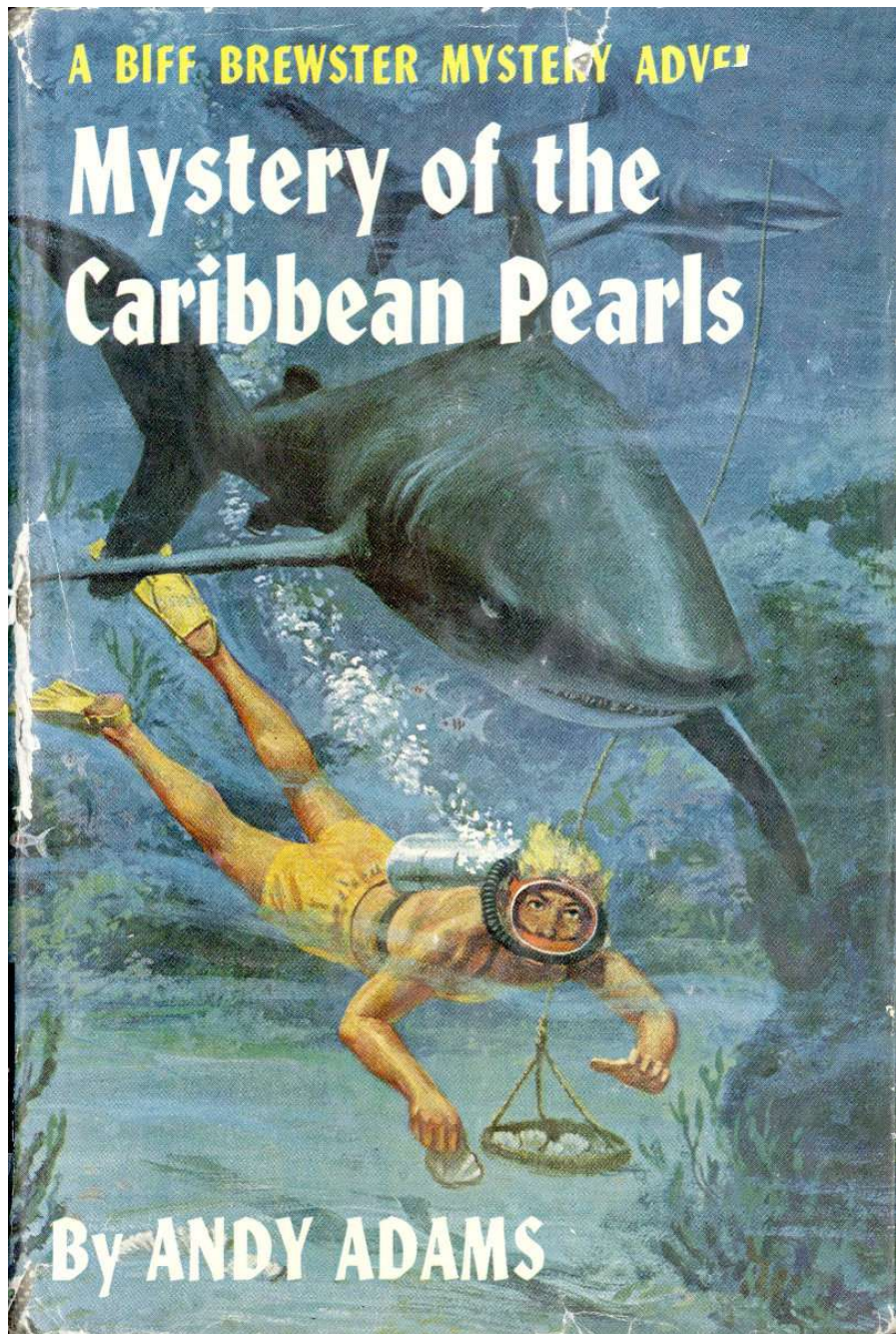


A BIFF BREWSTER MYSTERY ADVENTURE

Mystery of the Caribbean Pearls

By ANDY ADAMS



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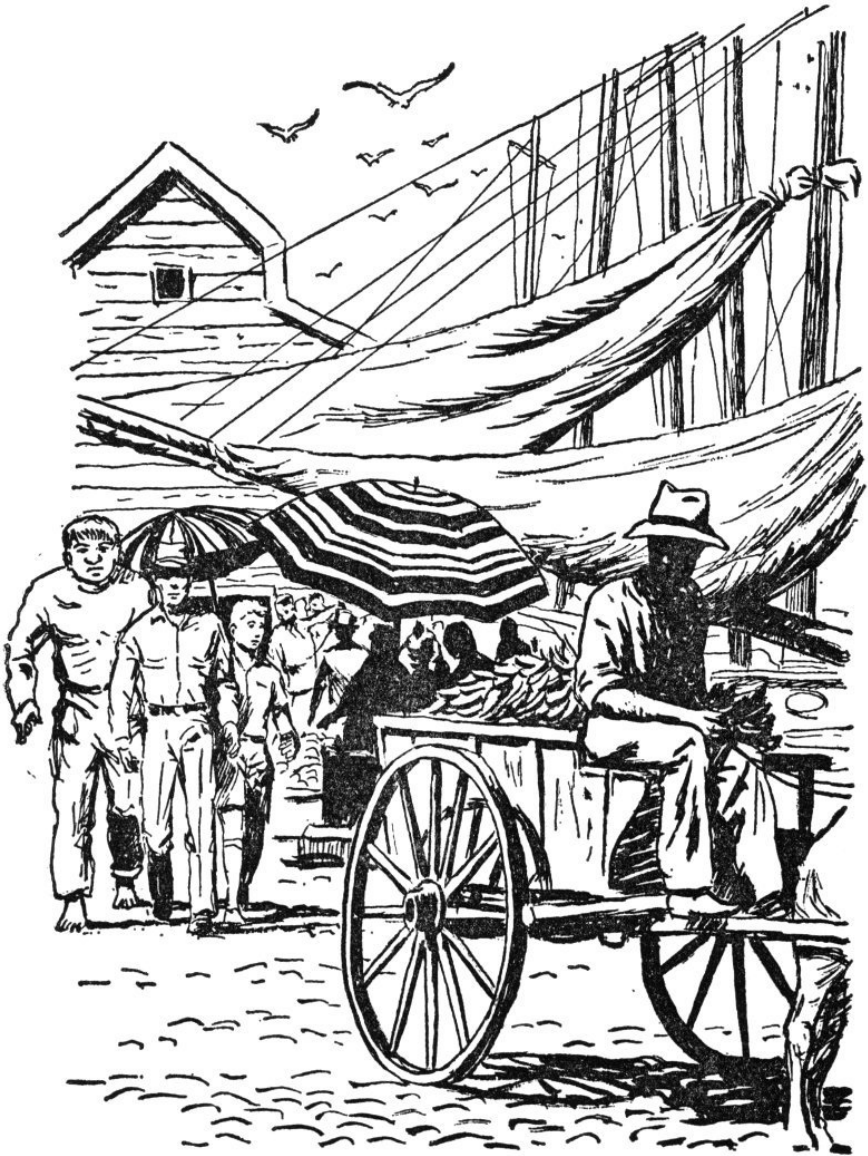
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MYSTERY OF
THE CARIBBEAN PEARLS ***

A BIFF BREWSTER



MYSTERY ADVENTURE



It seemed as if every resident of the town swarmed in the narrow street

**A BIFF BREWSTER
MYSTERY ADVENTURE**



MYSTERY OF THE CARIBBEAN PEARLS

By ANDY ADAMS

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MYSTERY OF THE CARIBBEAN

PEARLS

CHAPTER I

Discovery!

Lightning streaked the skies over the Windward Islands. The Caribbean Sea was a tumbled mass of foaming, angry waters.

The *chabasco* had struck with the quickness and lashing fury that is the nature of this most feared of tropical storms. A *chabasco* strikes without warning, with tornado-like violence, whirling and smiting and soaking. The storm ends as abruptly as it begins. The air regains its calm. Only the churned-up waters continue to smash upon the shore.

A final, brilliant flash of lightning revealed the gaunt figure of a man stumbling through the raging surf, fighting to reach the safety of the beach. He staggered out of the roiling waters and fell face down on the sand. His only motion was the agonized heaving of his shoulders as he gasped for breath.

His boat, his diving gear were gone, smashed to bits by the wildness of the storm which had washed him ashore on this tiny speck of an island. The island, he knew, was in the Baie du Trésor, Treasure Bay, off the east coast of the big island of Martinique.

As strength flowed back into the man's body, he sat up. Frantically he shot his hand into a pocket of his wet, worn, sun-bleached dungarees. An expression of relief crossed his face. In the faint light of a rising moon, he inspected the two objects in the upturned palm of his hand.

He held two perfectly matched black pearls.

This was the end of his search, the end of weeks under the blazing sun of the Caribbean; the result of hundreds of dives to the bottom of the sea. He knew, and he had the evidence in his hand, that he had made a discovery which would startle the entire area of the Caribbean Sea from the Florida keys to the coast of South America.

He had discovered a pearl fishery so fabulous, so unbelievably rich, that his find would make headline news throughout the world.

He knew also that unless he could keep his find secret until his claim on the pearl fishery was established, treasure seekers and money-mad cutthroats would descend on him like hungry sharks.

He felt sure that his actions and explorations had been secretly watched. He knew who the watchers were—unscrupulous men waiting hungrily to move in and jump the claim he had struggled so hard to find.

His first problem was to get off this tiny speck in the bay and back to Martinique. He was no more than five miles off the shore of the main body of the big island. If he had reckoned his position correctly, there was a long spit of land jutting out from Martinique that he could reach by a two-mile swim. He would need to rest. Calm now, he settled into the sand to sleep.

When the man awakened, the light of a brilliant tropical morning proved that he had been correct in determining his position. The sandspit jutted out, welcoming him. Farther beyond he could see the lush, green-covered pitons rising in the center of Martinique. Some of these peaks reached a height of nearly four thousand feet.

The man began his long, slow swim. He had no fear of the sea—though he knew sharks abounded in these waters, and he was unarmed.

But by midmorning he had reached the mainland of Martinique safely. He was pleasantly tired from his long swim, and stretched out on the warm sands to rest and allow his clothing to dry.

In the early afternoon he reached the town of La Trinité, sprawling at the approach of Presqu'île de la Caravelle, the peninsula that formed the Baie du Trésor.

He found a room in a small *pension*, a rooming house, and spent most of the night writing two letters. One of them was addressed to his son in The Netherlands. The other was to Charles Keene on the island of

Curaçao in the Netherlands Antilles.

Along with the letters, he carefully prepared two small boxes.

In the morning, he was standing at the post office door the moment it opened. It was with great relief that he saw his letters and packages go into the mailbag that would be trucked over the pitons to Fort-de-France at noon, then flown on to Curaçao on the night flight.

In his relief and great elation over his discovery, the man shed the characteristic watchfulness that usually marked his movements. He momentarily had dropped his guard, and did not notice that his every action had been closely followed from the moment he had arrived in La Trinité.

CHAPTER II

Seeing Double

The cablegram was short and to the point.

MAY I BORROW MY FAVORITE NEPHEW FOR A COUPLE OF WEEKS
STOP URGENT.

It was signed, "Charles Keene," and had been sent from Willemstad, Curaçao, in the Netherlands Antilles.

Biff Brewster, the favorite nephew referred to in the cablegram, looked at his parents hopefully.

"Well, Martha, what do you think?" Thomas Brewster asked Biff's mother, as the three of them stood in Mr. Brewster's study.

"Oh dear! I really don't know what to say." A frown spread over Mrs. Brewster's pleasant, friendly face, drawing her arched eyebrows closer together. "It seems to me that Biff is away from home so much of the time."

"I know, dear. But you must admit that we have encouraged these trips. I still feel that travel is as important to a boy's education as his formal schooling," Tom Brewster replied to his wife's mild protest.

"And Uncle Charlie says it will only be for a couple of weeks," Biff put in. "My spring vacation starts next week. I wouldn't be missing much school—only a day or two at the most."

Biff looked from his mother's face to his father's. He wanted so much to go. In his mind's eye, he was already seeing the sparkling waters of the Caribbean Sea, dotted with palm-studded islands, long white beaches, and coral reefs.

The Windward Islands, the Leeward Islands, Martinique, Aruba, Barbados, Guadeloupe, St. Kitts—all these colorful, romantic, exciting

names raced through the boy's head.

"How's your Spanish these days, son?" Tom Brewster asked.

"It's okay, Dad. I'm scoring well in it at school, and of course I picked up a lot more Spanish when we were in Mexico."

Biff was beginning to feel easier. His father's question was an indication that one-half of his parents was considering favorably Uncle Charlie's cabled request.

"How 'bout it, Mom?" Biff pressed the opening his father had given him. "You know Uncle Charlie and I always get along swell. We're a good team."

Charles Keene was Mrs. Brewster's brother.

"Charlie's so reckless, though," Mrs. Brewster continued in a voice registering protest. "If I remember correctly, you and he barely made it out of China before getting into serious trouble."

Biff had no answer to this statement. It was all too true. He and Uncle Charlie had been flown out of China—they had slipped across the border illegally—to Rangoon in Burma and then on to the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong, with Chinese Red agents breathing down their necks.

"Any idea what your brother is doing in the Caribbean?" Mr. Brewster asked his wife.

Biff's mother shook her head. "Not any more than you have, Tom. Have you heard from your uncle, Biff?"

"Only one letter since we got chased out of China," the boy replied. "That came about a month after I got back home. All he said was that things were too hot for him to operate in the Orient for a while."

"He is still with the firm of Explorations Unlimited, isn't he?" Mr. Brewster asked.

"Oh, yes. Uncle Charlie said the company was negotiating a contract

that would have him operating in this hemisphere. He didn't say what kind of operation it was, though."

"It must be tied in with his wanting you to come to Curaçao, son."

"Looks that way, Dad. What about it, Mom?" Biff looked hopefully at his mother. She didn't reply for a few moments. Then she said, "Well, I suppose—"

Mrs. Brewster never finished her sentence. The youngest members of the Brewster family burst into the study.

"Mom! Dad! It's a cablegram!" eleven-year-old Ted Brewster shouted, waving an envelope over his head.

"Yes! Another one," Monica, Ted's twin sister, chimed in.

The twins were five years younger than Biff. Their ambition was sometime, someday to travel "*a-lone*," as they emphatically put it. They listened goggle-eyed to tales of the adventures Biff and his father or Biff and Uncle Charlie had shared. On several occasions the twins had gone with their parents and brother to the romantic places where these adventures had taken place. Mrs. Brewster, always present when the twins were voyaging, had taken great care to see that her two youngest were not exposed to the dangers that had accompanied Biff's far-away adventures. Ted and Monica could hardly wait until they were old enough to take part in them themselves.

"It's for you this time, Biff," Ted said. Excitement shone on his young face. His eyes sparkled.

"I'll wager I can tell you who it's from," Mr. Brewster said, smiling.

"Uncle Charlie! Uncle Charlie!" Monica pealed, like a gay bell.

Biff ripped open the envelope. The room became silent.

"It's from Uncle Charlie all right," Biff said. Then he read: "YOUR PASSAGE BOOKED SOUTHERN AIRLINES FLIGHT ONE TWO NINE TO MIAMI SUNDAY MARCH TWELVE. RE-PLANE MIAMI FOR CURAÇAO CARIB AIRWAYS FLIGHT TWO NINE SIX. BE SEEING

YOU. LOVE TO ALL.”

Biff handed the cablegram to his father and looked at his mother.

“I must say my brother takes things pretty much for granted,” Mrs. Brewster said, laughing.

“That’s Charlie for you,” Tom Brewster said. “When he goes into action, he moves fast.”

“He surely does, Dad, whether it’s against Chinese bandits or sending cablegrams,” Biff agreed.

“One cable this morning. A second this afternoon. Well, I guess we’d better be making up our minds, Martha. What do you say?”

“Can we all go?” Ted wanted to know.

“Oh, yes, I’d love to go to the West Indies,” Monica pleaded.

“I’m afraid it will be just Biff this time,” their father said. “Providing, of course,” he added hurriedly, “your mother approves. Well, Martha?”

Martha Brewster shrugged her shoulders and smiled. She was still torn. But she had great confidence in her son’s ability to take care of himself. He had proved this time and time again. And Charles was her favorite brother, reckless though he was.

“All right, Biff darling. I might as well give in now as later. I know you and your father won’t give me a moment’s peace until I do.”

Mrs. Brewster’s statement was met with cheers led by Ted and Monica. Biff crossed the room and put an arm around his mother’s shoulders. She pressed her head against her strong son’s chest.

The conference in the Brewster home in Indianapolis, Indiana, came to an end.

Sunday morning at ten o’clock found the Brewster family at the Indianapolis airport. Flight 129, southbound for Miami, had already

been called. The last hasty farewells were said, and ten minutes later the plane speeding Biff southward became a mere speck in the sky to his mother and father and the twins.

The plane zooming Biff to another adventure landed at the Miami airport in the late afternoon. Coming in over the city of fabulous hotels, America's playground, Biff could see the lingering rays of the setting sun slanting out over the bouncing waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

From Carib Airways, Biff learned that the flight which was to take him on to Curaçao was not scheduled to depart until midnight. After a dinner of delicious stone crabs, Biff wandered up and down Lincoln Road, the famed shopping center in Miami Beach, gazing into the windows of the shops which lined the streets.

He left Lincoln Road and swung on to Collins Avenue. One hotel after another, each in turn seeming more luxurious than its predecessor, lined the east side of the avenue, between the street and the white, sandy beach.

The night air was warm and gentle in contrast to the cold, blustery March winds Biff had left behind him in Indianapolis.

Biff returned to the airport shortly after eleven, reclaimed his baggage, which he had checked, and waited for his flight to Curaçao to be called.

The call came just ten minutes before midnight:

"Carib Airways announces the departure of Flight two nine six, for Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Willemstad, Curaçao, and Fort-de-France, Martinique. Now loading at Gate Nine. All aboard, please."

Biff joined the line which was moving slowly through Gate 9. He looked carefully about him, as he always did, spotting faces that he might run into again. He had learned in the past that it was wise to remember as much about one's fellow passengers as possible. No telling when such knowledge might come in handy. Besides, he found the faces of traveling people interesting. On many long rides, he had

amused himself by trying to guess where they had come from, where they were going, and why.

The line shuffled slowly forward. Flight 296 was filled. There would be no seats for the hopeful standbys.

Biff had checked his heavier bag through earlier, when he had presented his ticket. Now he carried only a small, light dispatch case. Accidentally, as the person directly in front of him stopped suddenly, Biff's dispatch case swung forward, striking the person on the calf of one leg.

"Pardon me," Biff said.

The person turned around. Startled, Biff stopped quickly. He even backed up a step in his amazement.

"Am I seeing things?" Biff asked himself, giving his head a shake and blinking. "Am I asleep? It can't be. It just can't be."

The person Biff stared at returned his stare. The same astonishment spread over the face of the boy he had bumped.

Biff's own mirror at home couldn't have reflected his image better. He might have been looking at himself!

CHAPTER III

Backfire

Neither boy spoke, so startled were they by their striking resemblance to one another.

“This can’t be,” Biff said, half aloud. “That boy is—is—ME!”

The other lad must have been thinking the same.

“Step forward, please,” the gate attendant called out sharply. “Keep the line moving.”

In their astonishment, Biff and his double had stopped in their tracks.

Dazedly, Biff and the other boy reached the gate. They presented their tickets. The attendant looked from one to the other.

“Twins?” he asked, a smile on his face.

Still apparently unable to speak, the boys shook their heads.

They walked across the apron leading to the waiting aircraft. As they walked along, side by side, each cast quick, questioning glances at one another.

It was unbelievable!

The boys were the same height. Both were broad of shoulder. Both carried their well-muscled bodies with the grace and posture of the trained athlete.

The only immediately noticeable difference distinguishing the boys was their clothing. Biff was hatless, as always. The other boy wore a hat. Biff wore light gray slacks, a soft sleeveless sweater, and a loose sports coat. His double wore a tight-fitting, dark-blue suit and a white, high-collared shirt. His clothes were as formal as Biff’s were informal.

They mounted the loading ramp and entered the plane. The stewardess gave them the same interested, friendly look the gate attendant had given them.

“I’m sure you two will want to sit together,” she said. “You’re twins, aren’t you?”

“No, ma’am,” Biff gulped.

The stewardess seated the boys, disbelief showing in her eyes as they shifted from the face of one boy to the other. She started moving toward the door, but kept turning her head to cast a look at the boys.

Biff was seated next to the window. His seat companion arose, removed his hat, and placed it on the rack above. His hair was cropped short, as Biff’s was. It was a shade darker, perhaps, but just a shade. Biff’s habit of going hatless could have made the difference.

On close examination of the boys’ faces, there was one noticeable difference. Biff’s eyes were bluish-gray. The other boy’s were a deep blue.

Biff turned in his seat to confront his companion.

“Since we look so much alike,” Biff said, “maybe we’d better find out who we are. I’m Biff Brewster. So you can’t be. I mean, if I am Biff Brewster—and I know I was until I saw you just now—then you must be someone else.”

Biff was having a hard time trying to say what he meant. He wasn’t exactly sure just *what* he meant.

The other boy smiled.

“I am glad to make your acquaintance, Biff Brewster,” he said quite formally. “My name is Derek Zook. I am from The Netherlands.”

Derek’s English was good with hardly any trace of accent. His phrasing, somewhat stiff and formal, marked it as Continental, not American, English. It was obvious that he had acquired his knowledge of the language at school. His sentences didn’t have the free and easy

swing of a native language.

“Where are you going?” Biff asked.

“I go to Willemstad in Curaçao. That’s in the Netherlands Antilles.”

“Yes, I know,” Biff replied. His astonishment continued to grow as the coincidences grew. “I’m going there too. Here we are. We look alike, and we’re going to the same place. Now how about that!” Biff laughed. Derek joined in the laughter.

For the next few minutes the boys were quiet as the aircraft taxied to its take-off runway. The four engines revved up. The plane started rolling slowly down the strip. It rolled and rolled, gaining momentum. Then it was airborne, heading out over the Atlantic toward Port-au-Prince, Haiti, nearly eight hundred miles away.

During the flight, Biff and Derek became more and more friendly. They had much in common, but Biff noticed during the conversation that while Derek was most willing to talk about his home in The Netherlands, his schooling, and other, incidental topics, he said nothing about why he was going to Curaçao.

Biff was cagey, too. If Derek wouldn’t talk about the reason for his flying across the Atlantic to visit a speck of an island in the Caribbean, then Biff felt it wise to say as little about his own visit as possible.

There wasn’t much Biff could tell, anyway. He wouldn’t know why his Uncle Charlie wanted him until he saw him. Biff did tell Derek that he was going to be met by his uncle, but he didn’t tell his new friend the kind of work Uncle Charlie did.

The plane flew high over the easternmost tip of Cuba. Near three o’clock in the morning, Haiti was spotted, a dark, shadowy mass in the grayness of the dawn. High up over the Haitian mountains, the sky could be seen lightening on the eastern horizon. Neither boy saw it. They had talked themselves out and were sleeping.

The plane went into a sharp descent for its landing at Port-au-Prince. There was an hour’s delay before the plane took off on its next leg, the two-and-a-half hour flight to Curaçao.

Derek was the first to stir. Biff opened one eye, closed it again, and settled down into the seat.

“Do you know our time of arrival, Biff?” Derek asked, his voice clear and wide awake.

“Bout seven,” Biff mumbled sleepily. “Let’s get some more shut-eye.”

“Shut-eye? I do not understand,” Derek said, puzzled.

“Sleep,” answered Biff. “Good old sleep. But I can see this is the end of it for now.”

Wide awake, the two boys chatted in low voices until the island of Curaçao, fifty miles off the coast of Venezuela, came into view.

The island is less than forty miles long and not more than seven miles wide at its broadest point. From the air, it looked like a long splinter. To the south, the boys could see the mountainous coastline of oil-rich Venezuela.

The plane began a long, gradual descent for its landing at Willemstad. It came in low, seemingly only a few feet above the spanking waves of the Caribbean Sea. It shot over land and, minutes later, the crunch of the aircraft’s rubber-tired landing wheels was felt throughout the plane.

As the plane rolled to a stop, an idea hit Biff. “Hey, Derek. I’ve got a plan,” he exclaimed. “A good one. I’d like to play a joke on my uncle.”

“Good, I like jokes, Biff. What is it?”

Biff didn’t answer right away. Some of the excitement and eagerness faded from his face. “I just thought—somebody must be waiting to meet you, so I guess my idea wouldn’t work.”

“I’m not sure anyone is going to meet me, Biff. In fact, I’m almost certain no one will.”

Biff was so busy thinking about his idea that the significance of Derek’s reply didn’t register. Only later did he remember the remark,

and realize how strange it was that Derek, who had come thousands of miles, had no one to meet him.

“In that case then,” Biff went on, “here’s what I have in mind. We look so much alike, I’d like to try and see if we can fool my uncle. So, if you’re game, here’s my plan. You get off the plane first. Go right into the terminal. If you look as much like me as I think you do, and as others do too, then Uncle Charlie will think you’re me.”

A grin came over the Dutch boy’s face.

“That does sound like fun. I’d be Biff Brewster to your uncle, wouldn’t I?”

“That’s right. I’ll stay in the plane until you’re in the terminal. I’ll follow you in about five minutes.”

The passengers were piling out of their seats now, reaching up to the racks above for their hats and coats. Derek retrieved his hat, turned to wink at Biff, and started toward the front of the plane.

“Hey, Derek!” Biff called. “Wait a minute.”

Biff got up and overtook his new friend.

“Fraid Uncle Charlie would spot you in a second if you wore that hat. He knows I never wear one.”

Derek took off his hat and handed it to Biff.

“Another thing,” Biff continued. “Your coat. Looks too European for me to be wearing it. Let’s change.”

Derek doffed his suit coat and put on Biff’s sports jacket. Then he left the plane.

Biff, grinning in anticipation, waited until almost everyone was off the plane. Then, wearing Derek’s coat and hat, he deplaned and walked toward the terminal.

As he stood at the entrance to the terminal, it took several moments

for Biff's eyes to adjust from the bright glare of the outside sun to the soft light of the terminal's interior. He looked about, trying to spot his uncle. He finally saw him, to the right, standing in front of a cigar counter, smiling as he talked to Derek.

Biff was starting toward his uncle and Derek when two men entered the terminal from the street side. They looked around quickly, saw Biff, and came hurriedly over to him.

"Derek Zook?" one of the men asked.

Before Biff could protest or explain, the other man grasped him firmly by the arm.

"We must hurry. Your father is waiting."

Biff found himself being hustled toward the terminal exit.

Who's Fooling Whom?

Biff was wedged tightly between the two men. They pressured him toward the exit. He could have resisted, probably could have escaped in the crowded terminal, but since they were moving in a direction that would take them right past Uncle Charlie and Derek, Biff decided against a struggle.

He saw that his uncle was watching the action closely. Derek, fortunately, had his back turned. Biff's "friendly" captors would not be able to see Derek's face and remark the striking resemblance.

Within a few feet of Uncle Charlie and Derek, Biff decided to make his move. He opened his mouth to shout. Uncle Charlie fixed his eyes firmly on Biff and shook his head. A big wink from Uncle Charlie warned Biff further to take no immediate action. Uncle Charlie tossed his head, gesturing toward the exit door.

Biff read these signals as quickly as if his uncle had given them to him verbally. Uncle Charlie wanted him to go with these men. Why, Biff didn't know, of course, but he realized that his uncle must have a real purpose behind his strange action.

Outside the terminal, Biff was hustled into a black limousine. It was a long, sleek-looking foreign car, all windows tightly closed. Was this to prevent any outcry from being heard, Biff wondered? Or was it simply because the car was air-conditioned against the tropical heat?

As the car pulled away, Biff quickly glanced out of the rear window. He hoped to see his uncle pulling out in another car to follow. The streets, filled with tourists, honking cars, and cyclists blocked his vision. "Well, he must be following me," Biff said to himself. "I hope," he added.

Biff was in the rear seat with one of the men. The other was driving.

“You had the good trip from The Netherlands?” the man asked.

“From where?” For a moment Biff had forgotten the role he was playing; forgot he was impersonating Derek. “Oh, yes. Yes, very good,” he replied. “It was quite exciting, flying over the ocean.” Biff was careful not to mention which ocean.

“And your father, so anxious to see you, he is,” Biff’s seat companion said.

“Why wasn’t he at the airport?” Biff asked. He had decided to play along with these men. So far they had shown no outright enmity, had displayed no threatening signs. Even so, Biff felt certain that should he try to leap from the car, he would be forcibly detained.

“He is not well. His explorations at the bottom of the sea have exhausted him.”

One more bit of information, Biff thought. Now he knew that Derek’s father was searching for something on the ocean bed. What? Sunken treasure? These waters had been plied by pirates in the olden days.

“He will welcome what you have brought him,” the man said.

Now just what could that be, Biff asked himself. This man obviously was trying to pump him—trying to get him to reveal some information.

“It is important to his search, no?” the man continued.

“Come on, now,” Biff thought. “You don’t think I’ll fall for that leading question.” From the cautious manner of the man’s questioning, it occurred to Biff that the man himself probably didn’t know exactly what Derek Zook was bringing from The Netherlands.

“Oh, yes, I am sure that I will be of much help to my father,” Biff said aloud.

“Ah, good,” the man replied.

“You know, sir,” Biff said, “we have been together for ten minutes,

and although you know my name, I don't know yours."

"A million pardons, my young friend. I am Herman Dietz. And my friend driving is Sidney Cade. He is more often called Specks, however. Perhaps you can see why?"

Biff already had noticed that the driver's face was covered with red blotches. Some of them were small freckles. Others were unpleasant red spots the size of a nickel.

For several moments they rode in silence. Biff was fascinated by the sights around him. They were riding parallel to a broad waterway. On either side, large oceangoing ships were moored to gaily colored quays. Cruise ships, Biff thought to himself. Shops lined the sides of the quaint street along which they were traveling. Tourists crowded these shops, which displayed souvenirs, perfumes, colorful sea shells, shoes, neckties, and women's handbags.

Dietz noticed Biff's interest.

"Curaçao, you know, is a free port," he told him. "There are no duties charged on the thousands of items for sale. That means that perfumes, for example, which would cost fifty, a hundred dollars an ounce elsewhere, cost only a small fraction of that amount in Curaçao."

Biff knew this fact. He meant to buy presents for his family while in Curaçao. He didn't comment, though. Dietz wanted to be friends. Biff felt it advisable to go along with him until he showed his hand more plainly.

Another block and the limousine turned into a curving driveway and stopped in front of a white, four-story building.

"Here we are," Dietz said, opening the door.

As Biff got out, he noticed a small, gold-lettered sign reading: "Hotel Del Mar." Just before mounting the steps to the hotel lobby, Biff cast a swift glance back in the direction from which they had come. He saw a small sports car pull over to the curb. He wasn't certain, but the two figures he saw in the car could be his uncle and Derek.

"My father is here?" Biff asked, as the trio crossed the lobby to the elevators.

"He is to meet us in a room upstairs," Dietz replied as they entered an elevator.

Dietz's quick reply caused more doubts to grow in Biff's mind. It seemed to him that any father, unless so ill or injured as to be confined to bed, would certainly want to meet a son who had made the long flight all the way from Holland.

Stopping off on the fourth floor, Dietz led the way down a long corridor to a room at the end. He took out a key and inserted it in the lock. He didn't knock, Biff noticed. "Pretty rude," he commented mentally, as Dietz pushed the door open.

"Enter, Derek," Dietz said.

Biff preceded the two men into the room. One quick glance showed him it was empty. He heard the door close behind him and the key turn.

Turning around swiftly, Biff challenged Dietz, saying, "My father—he's not here. And he has never been here. You know that. Why was I brought here?"

Dietz's reply was surprising.

"You are very clever, for one so young," Dietz said smoothly. "No, your father is not here."

"Then where is he? I demand that you take me to him at once."

"You must be patient. Allow me to explain."

"It's about time you did!"

Specks was standing with his back to the door, as if expecting Biff to try to force his way out of the room.

"It would have been highly dangerous for us to have taken you

directly to your father,” Dietz continued his explanation.

“Go on,” Biff demanded.

“Has your father written you about a man who was once in his employ?” Dietz asked.

“He may have, and he may not. That is my business and my father’s,” Biff answered in an angry voice.

“Ah ... and would that man’s name be Charles Keene?” Dietz went on smoothly.

Now here was a twist, Biff thought. This is an angle to explore more thoroughly.

“I may have heard that name,” Biff said. “To be truthful, I have.”

“Then you must know that this Charles Keene represents a great danger to your father and what he has worked for so long.”

This situation was growing more and more weird. Dietz was talking about Biff’s favorite uncle, but not knowing it, of course. Dietz was completely convinced that Biff was Derek and thought he was telling Derek Zook about a complete stranger. Biff already was beginning to get an idea of what Dietz was leading up to. The double-cross was becoming clearer. What Dietz didn’t know was that he was double-crossing himself.

“Keene was discharged by your father. For good reason. But this made Keene furious. He swore revenge on your father.” Dietz paused.

Biff could just see his Uncle Charlie’s expression when he passed Dietz’s story on to him.

“We knew that Keene would be at the airport to meet you—”

“How could you have known?” Biff asked. The only way Dietz *could* have gotten this information was directly from Uncle Charlie. Derek’s arrival evidently had not been foreseen, or Derek would have

expected to be met. But his, Biff's, arrival, had been planned by his uncle. Why would Uncle Charlie have passed this word on to Dietz? That question was a real puzzler. Biff felt he might get more of the answer by letting Dietz go on with his lying explanation.

"We have kept a close watch on Keene's actions."

That's for sure, Biff thought.

"We knew he planned to meet you at the airport. It was his intention to prevent a meeting between you and your father until he could extract certain valuable information from your father. Only then would he permit you to join him."

"And just where do you come in on this?" Biff asked.

"Ah—we are your father's friends. We have worked closely with him. That is why he asked us to meet you."

Dietz was digging a bigger hole for himself to fall into. Since he thought Biff was Derek, Dietz had no idea, of course, of how he was giving himself away.

"We had arranged to stop at this hotel just in case Keene tried to follow us. I was sure that he would try. He wants to know where your father is. But I am equally certain that we have eluded him."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, Mr. Dietz," Biff said to himself. Aloud, he said, "And how can you be sure?"

"I go now to make certain. I will look around most carefully. If I do not see Keene, then it will be safe for us to take you to your father. Specks, here, will stay with you to protect you."

Biff wasn't fooled. He knew that Specks was being left behind to keep him from escaping. From the wily smile on Dietz's face, Biff knew that whatever the plan was, Dietz thought it was moving ahead smoothly. Biff smothered a crazy desire to laugh. Dietz's plan would be working out successfully if the real Derek were here.

One thing was very clear to Biff as Specks locked the door behind Dietz. These men did not know where Derek's father was. They were stalling. The whole elaborate story Dietz had woven showed that. His plan must have been to get Uncle Charlie to lead him to Derek's father. Dietz had figured he could do this if he could get to Derek first. When Charles Keene failed to meet Derek, he would have to go to Zook and explain. Dietz probably had planted a man at the airport to spot and follow Keene.

"And this all started," Biff said to himself, stretching out in a comfortable chair, "when I wanted to play a practical joke on my uncle by having him think Derek was I."

Then it dawned on Biff. He couldn't have played it the way Uncle Charlie had wanted any better if Uncle Charlie himself had planned the switch in identities. It looked to Biff now as if Uncle Charlie didn't know where Derek's father was, either.

Parts of the whole puzzling experience had fallen into place. But there were more pieces still to be fitted together.

Uncle Charlie would know the answers. But where was he? Nearly half an hour had passed since Dietz had left the room. Specks, sprawled in a chair, still watched Biff closely.

Idly, Biff rose and strolled across the room and sauntered out on the balcony. He could feel Specks' eyes following him, but the man made no move.

On the balcony, Biff understood Specks' inactivity. There was little chance of getting out of the room this way. The drop to the water below was at least seventy-five feet—straight down.

Appear and Disappear

“Thinking of taking a swim?” Specks called out. “Some dive you’d have to make first, eh?”

Biff turned around. He could see the fat, satisfied grin on Specks’ face. Biff recrossed the room and stood over the comfortably sprawling Specks. He wasn’t too big a man. “Bet I could take him,” Biff thought.

Biff’s determined expression seemed to alarm Specks. He sat upright in his chair, but at the same time cringed against the back of it. Some of Specks’ boldness had left the room with boss Dietz.

Only one thing held Biff back and kept him from mixing with Specks. What would he accomplish by overpowering his guard? Where would he go? He had to wait until Uncle Charlie appeared. And supposing he was successful in taking Specks? Dietz might come back before Uncle Charlie showed up.

As these thoughts raced through Biff’s mind, a knock came on the door. It was barely audible. Biff looked at Specks and started for the door. Specks leaped out of his chair and jumped for Biff. He tried to push Biff aside, and they tangled.



"Think you can handle him?" a voice behind them said

Their struggle was brief, halted by a voice from behind them.

“Think you can handle him?”

Biff and Specks swung around. On the balcony, a nonchalant smile on his handsome face, stood Uncle Charlie.

Specks, his head pivoting from Biff to Charlie, a frightened look in his eyes, reached for the doorknob. He wanted out, and fast.

“Grab him!” Uncle Charlie ordered and came charging across the room.

Not once so far had Uncle Charlie called Biff by name. Biff took his lead from this. Uncle Charlie still didn’t want Specks to know that Biff wasn’t Derek.

Biff wrapped his arms around Specks, restraining him. Uncle Charlie, at their side, grabbed Specks by the shoulders and wrenched him away from Biff’s grasp.

“Now, how do you want to play this?” Charles Keene asked. His voice was firm, grim, even though his eyes held a sparkle of amusement.

Specks didn’t reply. He tried to pull away from Uncle Charlie’s grasp. He didn’t have a chance.

“There are several ways of handling you,” Biff’s uncle went on. “You see this?” He removed one hand and doubled it into a ham-sized fist. “It’s pretty large for a sleeping tablet. But well placed, like right here”—he flicked Specks’ jaw with the fist—“and I’m sure you will take a long, long nap.”

Specks cowered.

“Or, we could tie you up. But if you’ll be a good little Specks, and not try anything, we’ll leave you alone. Now get over to that chair and sit down.” Charlie’s voice was angry now, and he shoved Specks violently toward the chair.

Specks toppled over the chair’s arm, shrank back in it, and tried to

make himself even smaller than he was.

Biff and his uncle moved over to a corner of the room most distant from Specks and talked to one another in low tones.

“Good to see you, Biff. Sorry I had to welcome you this way. But things are beginning to move. I didn’t expect to plunge you into this up to your neck so fast, but I think things are working out better than I had hoped.”

In a low voice, Biff replied, “Uncle Charlie, just before you came in from the balcony, there was a knock on the door. There was another man here, too, not so long ago. A man named Dietz. That knock could have been him.”

“I don’t think so, Biff. I’m sure it wasn’t.”

“Then who could it have been?” Biff asked.

“Why don’t you go to the room next door and find out,” Uncle Charlie suggested, grinning broadly. “Go ahead. Specks won’t give me any trouble.”

Biff shrugged his shoulders, opened the door, and stepped out into the hallway. He shook his head. That was Uncle Charlie for you. Daring, reckless, always making a mysterious game out of any situation. Keeping up the suspense as long as possible.

Although he didn’t always approve of his uncle’s methods, Biff had to admit that with Uncle Charlie, there was never a dull moment.

Moments later, Biff returned.

“Well?” The big grin was still on Uncle Charlie’s face. It disappeared instantly on Biff’s report.

“There is no one in the room next door,” Biff said in a quiet, steady voice.

“Stay here!” Charles Keene leaped for the door. Biff, standing in the doorway, saw him dash into the adjoining room. He was back out in a

flash. No longer did he wear a grin. His expression was as serious as Biff had ever seen it.

Charles Keene walked back to Biff, his brows knitted in worry and anger.

"I guess I outsmarted myself," he said.

"Who was I supposed to find in the next room?" Biff whispered. "Derek?"

"Yes. It was he who knocked just before I came in. It was this way. We couldn't be sure how many people might have been in this room. We knew you were. We followed you to the hotel—"

"But how did you know what room I'd be in?"

"Oh, that was easy. I'm well known here at the Del Mar. The clerk told me Dietz's room number. I took the room next to it."

"You know Dietz, then?" Biff cut in, glancing sidewise to make sure Specks could not overhear them.

"Do I? He's a bad one. Getting more and more desperate, too. There's a pot of gold that he's afraid we're going to get to first."

"Pot of gold?"

"Well, not literally; not actually gold. But it's worth many pots of gold—big ones."

"Go on, Uncle Charlie," Biff whispered. "How did you get over to this balcony?"

"There's a ledge, not a very wide one, that joins the balconies...."

Biff remembered the ledge now. It wasn't more than ten inches wide. His uncle had taken a dangerous chance in crossing on that narrow ledge from his room to this one.

"The boy, by knocking on the door, was to cause enough distraction

to give me time to cross the ledge to this room. I was counting on the element of surprise if I found you being held by more than two men. Remember, surprise can add the strength of another man to any attack.”

“I sure will remember.”

“Well, when I got to your balcony and saw just you and Specks, I knew things were going to be easy.”

“But it didn’t work out quite that way,” Biff said.

“No. I never thought Derek would be in danger.”

“And now he’s disappeared.”

Uncle Charlie nodded his head. He strode back into the room and stood, hands on hips, glowering down at the cowering Specks.

“Where is he?” Charlie demanded. “Where’s Dietz?”

Specks didn’t answer.

“Speak up, or I’ll make you talk.”

“I don’t know,” Specks replied. His high voice cracked as he answered. There was no doubt but that Specks was almost numb with fear.

Charles Keene reached down and grabbed the man by the shoulder. He shook him like an angry lion shaking its kill.

“Please, Mr. Keene,” Specks begged. “I don’t know. That’s the truth.”

Biff tugged at Uncle Charlie’s arm, and he released his hold on the man.

“What is it?” Charlie asked, looking into Biff’s face. Biff indicated with a nod of his head for his uncle to follow him. He then went to the doorway and stood in the hallway. His uncle came along.

“Uncle Charlie, that man’s too frightened of you to talk, even if he

does know where Dietz has gone.”

Charles Keene nodded his head. “Guess you’re right, Biff. Got any ideas?”

“Yes. And I’ve got some questions, too.”

“Fire away.”

“What do *you* think has happened to Derek?”

Uncle Charlie puzzled this question a few moments before replying.

“Two things could have happened. Dietz could have returned just as Derek knocked on the door, or when he was returning to our room.”

“You mean he forced Derek to go with him?”

“Yes. That could have happened.”

“But wouldn’t Derek have called out? Yelled for help?” Biff protested.

“Not necessarily. You see, Biff, Derek doesn’t know me any better than he knows Dietz. You two switching identities at the airport was a good joke. But then the joke turned into a serious matter.”

“Right!”

“I didn’t have enough time to fill Derek in on what was actually going on,” Uncle Charlie continued. “He can’t really be sure whether I’m working for him or against him. The same thing holds for Dietz. Dietz is a fast and smooth talker.”

“I learned that, myself,” Biff said.

“And Derek may have thought that you, by suggesting the switch in identities, might have been in on a plot for me to get my hands on him.”

“I see. It could look that way. Look, Uncle Charlie, if you would tell me what this whole thing is all about, I might be more help.”

Uncle Charlie apparently didn't hear Biff's last remark. He was deep in his own thinking.

"Or, this could have happened," he continued. From his tone of voice, Biff could tell that his uncle was more voicing his thoughts than speaking directly to him.

"Derek might have felt that I was holding him. And after knocking on this door, he could well have gone right on down to the lobby intending to leave the hotel. Dietz might have seen him there."

"And told him you were a crook and that he would take Derek to his father."

Uncle Charlie nodded his head in agreement.

"Look, Uncle Charlie, just where is Derek's father?"

"Brom Zook? I don't know, Biff."

"Dietz doesn't know either, does he?"

"I'm not sure."

It was just as Biff had reasoned. Neither his uncle nor Dietz knew where Derek's father, Brom Zook, was, and each thought the other might know.

"You were both hoping that the other would lead you to Brom Zook?"

"That's about how it shapes up, Biff."

"How long has Derek's father been missing?"

"I haven't seen him for over three months. The only communication I've had from him was a letter and a package. They came two weeks after I last saw him."

There were still many questions Biff wanted to ask his uncle. But right now, Biff figured they could wait. The important thing was to find Derek—and Derek's father.

“Uncle Charlie, if you think Dietz knows where Brom Zook is, then Specks would know, too, wouldn’t he?”

“Yes, I should think so.”

“Then wouldn’t it be best to release Specks? Tell him he’s free? Then we can follow Specks. If Dietz has talked Derek into going with him, or forced him to do so, then Specks will lead us to Dietz, Derek, and maybe even to his father.”

Charles Keene thought about this for a moment.

“You’ve got something there, Biff. You’re using your head better than I am. We’ll do it. You go on down to the lobby. Find a spot where you can’t be seen by anyone leaving the elevator. I’ll turn Specks loose and come down the stairs the moment he gets in the elevator. All right?”

Biff nodded his head.

“Good luck, Biff,” his uncle called out as Biff headed for the elevator.

Uncle Charlie had been right about Derek. The Dutch boy had followed Keene's instructions to the letter—up to a certain point.

Derek had watched Charles Keene climb over the balcony railing and onto the ledge leading to the next room. He had held his breath as he watched the older man press close to the building wall and inch his way along the narrow ledge toward the next balcony.

"Are you all right?" Derek had called softly.

Charles Keene, perspiration breaking out on his face, nodded his head in reply.

Derek had gone back into the room. Moments passed. Then he had slipped quietly out into the hallway and moved to the next door. Then he had knocked. He had waited a few minutes, trying to understand the muffled words coming from the other side of the door.

According to the plan, he was supposed to return to his room and wait for Biff.

"Should I?" Derek asked himself. He was even more confused than Biff had been by the strange turn of events. Charles Keene had seemed a pleasant enough chap. But in the ride from the airport to the hotel, he had been vague in some of the answers he had given. It was hard to distrust Keene, but his explanations had been so sketchy that Derek's suspicions had been aroused.

He had even wondered about the switch he had agreed to make with Biff. Why had Biff suggested the switch? Was it only a practical joke, or was there some deeper reason for Biff's suggestion?

What had really started Derek's doubts had taken place at the airport. When Biff and the two men had passed in the airport, Charles Keene

had restrained Derek from calling out to Biff.

Derek made up his mind. He would not return to the room Keene had taken him to. If Keene wasn't to be trusted, then Derek knew he would have a much greater chance of getting away from him in the hotel lobby than in a small room. Derek went to the elevator. Biff had missed him by only minutes when he went to find him.

In the lobby of the Del Mar, Derek took a seat with a clear view of the elevator bank and the door to the street. His eyes swung from one to the other. Derek was alert, waiting for any development.

Once he dug his hand into the inside pocket of his jacket. Alarm spread over his face when the object he was feeling for wasn't there. He almost panicked. Momentary relief came to him when he remembered that he was still wearing Biff's sports jacket. This relief was short-lived.

The package he had reached for was of vital importance to Derek. But Biff had swapped coats with him. Biff now had the package containing the small object of such value.

Had that been the real reason Biff had wanted to switch identifications? So that Biff could get possession of the package? It was hard for Derek to accept this theory. He had developed an instant liking for Biff. He felt that Biff had felt the same way about him. And how could Biff have known that he, Derek, was going to be in the airport in Miami? Could Biff possibly have known and arranged to be on the same plane?

It was too much of a puzzle for the Dutch boy.

Derek watched the floor indicator dial over one elevator move, showing an elevator descending. Would this be Biff? Or Charles Keene? The door slid open. An elderly couple emerged.

He turned his glance toward the street door. A man entered alone. He looked somewhat familiar to Derek. Where had he seen him?

The man glanced swiftly about the lobby. His eyes rested for a fraction of a second on Derek, then turned away. The man started for

the elevator. Almost there, he stopped abruptly and swung around to look closely at Derek. Disbelief showed in his eyes.

Derek recognized the man now. He had been one of the two who had walked out of the airport terminal building with Biff.

The man crossed quickly to the chair where Derek was sitting.

“Derek! You—you escaped! I mean—tell me, what happened?”

The man seemed confused. He was obviously unable to believe what he saw.

Dietz was confused. More so even than he displayed to Derek. How had Derek managed to get away from Specks? What had happened in the short space of time he had been away? He would have to play this very cagey now. Earlier, when he had been in the same room with this boy he could tell that the youth had grown suspicious of him.

Dietz took a stab in the dark.

“Did Keene come?” he asked. “And you got away?”

That was true enough. Derek had gotten away from Keene. But how did this man know that he had been with Keene? He couldn’t know—not yet—that it had actually been Biff Brewster, not Derek Zook, who had left the airport with him. Derek’s mind spun dizzily for a moment. “Catch hold of yourself,” he said sternly to his whirling brain.

Derek began thinking. Both he and Dietz held their silence for a few moments, stalling for time, each trying to think how to learn what the other actually knew.

“Yes, I left Mr. Keene,” Derek finally replied.

“Was there trouble? Specks—did Keene attack him? Was that when you made your escape?”

The picture was becoming clearer. The “Specks” Dietz referred to must have been the other man who had been with Biff and this man at the airport.

Derek had a pretty good idea now of what Dietz must be figuring had happened. Believing Specks was guarding the real Derek, Dietz must think that Keene had broken in on them and overpowered Specks, and that during the melee, he, Derek, had fled. It would be wise, Derek thought, to find out as much as he could.

This man must be the one Keene had referred to as Dietz. Derek decided to find this out.

“Yes, Mr. Dietz. That’s what happened.”

“Thank goodness you made your escape,” Dietz replied. “Keene is a dangerous man. Dangerous to you and your father.”

This was just about the same thing Keene had said to Derek about Dietz, Derek remembered. “Caution,” his brain flashed. “Which of them is lying?”

“My father?” he said aloud. “It is safe for you to take me to him now?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, we must leave at once. Before Keene comes down here.”

Dietz’s answer was quick. A bit too quick, Derek thought. But just what or whom was he to believe?

“We can go to him now. At once.”

“Where is he?” Derek asked this question in Dutch. This was to be the big test as to whether he would trust this man. Derek had asked one question of Keene in Dutch. Keene hadn’t replied. At the time, Derek had thought that perhaps Keene hadn’t been listening to him, he had been so busy telling Derek why he had permitted Biff to leave the airport with the two men.

“Your father is in a small hacienda to the north of Willemstad. A half hour’s drive.”

Dietz had replied in Dutch. Derek decided to take a chance.

“All right. Let’s go.”

Derek didn’t see the look of satisfaction and relief that flashed over Dietz’s dark features. He got up and followed Dietz out of the hotel. Moments later, Biff stepped out of the elevator. He just missed seeing Dietz and Derek leave the hotel.

Derek got into the same sleek, black limousine that had brought Biff to the hotel only an hour before. Dietz got behind the wheel. He wove through the crowded streets of Willemstad. The town and its houses and buildings looked very much like a small waterfront town back in Holland. The houses were the same type. Willemstad, Derek recalled, had been named for a small village back in Holland.

Leaving Willemstad behind them, Dietz sped along a narrow, winding road that climbed the foothills toward the highest point in Curaçao. Suddenly he swerved off the paved road onto an unimproved, heavily rutted dirt road. Ten minutes more and Dietz nosed the car through an arched opening in a pink stone wall. Ahead, Derek could see one large, rambling house, again stone, but painted a bright yellow, and several smaller stone buildings.

Dietz stopped in front of the entrance. Immediately there came out the largest man Derek had ever seen. His complexion was a light coffee-brown. He wore knee-length breeches. His legs and feet were bare. His heavy muscles bulged beneath a thin white shirt, its ends tied around his waist.

Without another glance at Derek, Dietz spoke to the giant.

“Take over, Crunch.”

Crunch was well named. Derek learned this when the man clamped a hand on his arm, grinning down at him evilly.

Derek knew now that he had placed his trust in the wrong man. But it was too late. He was powerless to resist. Crunch had the strength to match his giant size.

Gay Curaçao

Biff scanned the lobby of the hotel carefully as he emerged from the elevator. No sign of Derek, no sign of Dietz. They had left only minutes before Biff reached the lobby.

The stairway Uncle Charlie would be coming down, Biff noticed, led into the lobby just to the right, and slightly behind the elevator bank. Biff decided that behind the stairway would be the best place for him to watch for Specks. There was a large potted plant at the foot of the stairway. Biff got behind it. From here, he couldn't be seen, yet he had a good view of the elevators and the stairs. Specks in his frightened haste might take the stairway. He might not want to wait for an elevator, scared as he must be after Uncle Charlie had given him a verbal working-over.

The elevator must have been waiting on the fourth floor, for Specks came out of it into the lobby just after Biff had taken up his position. He saw the little man glance nervously around the lobby. Probably, Biff guessed, he was looking for boss Dietz. He needed his support, needed it badly.

Specks then headed for the exit. He moved at a pace so rapid that he bumped into several people who were entering.

"Where's Uncle Charlie?" Biff asked himself. "If he doesn't get here right now, we'll lose Specks." Biff stepped out from behind the huge plant and glanced up the curving stairs. No Uncle Charlie. Biff did think that he heard someone coming down, coming fast, taking two or more steps at a time. "That must be he," Biff thought. He decided to go after Specks, hoping his uncle would be right behind.

In the curved driveway outside the hotel, Biff looked right and left. Specks must have pulled out of there at a rapid clip. He wasn't in sight. Uncle Charlie came out of the hotel, taking the three steps at a

leap.

“Where is he? Which way did he go?”

“I don’t know,” Biff replied. “He was gone by the time I got out here.”

“Come on, then.” Uncle Charlie, on the run, headed for the street. Biff was at his heels.

On the sidewalk, they tried to spot Specks.

It seemed to Biff he had never seen so many people crowding the streets, all of them in a gay, holiday mood.

“It’s no use, Biff,” Charles Keene said. “We’d never catch Specks in this crowd, even if we knew which way he went.”

“Guess you’re right,” Biff replied. “But I hate to give up. I want to find Derek. Don’t like the idea of his thinking you and I are against him.”

“I know how you feel, Biff. Tell you what. Let’s just wander around, circulate among the crowds. Who knows, we might bump into him. If we don’t, locating him is going to take time and organization.”

Biff felt there would be little chance of that happening. He knew that his uncle was just trying to cheer him up. So, thought Biff, why not? See some of the town at the same time.

“Okay, Uncle Charlie, lead on.”

The man and boy joined in the thronging crowd of tourists, sight-seers, and bargain hunters.

“Four big cruise ships in, Biff,” Uncle Charlie said. “That’s why Curaçao is really hopping today.”

They stopped at several shops. Both kept an eye out for Derek, and Biff’s uncle made several inquiries of shopkeepers. No luck. “Let’s acquaint you with this fabulous city first, Biff,” he said. “Then back to the hotel for a powwow on our next move.”

Biff looked over some German cameras in El Globo on Heerenstraat. He was delighted with the store run by Juluis Penha on Breedestraat. This store sold dolls from all over. He bought a Dutch doll for Monica. It was dressed in traditional Dutch clothes—wooden shoes, a gaily colored frock, and a stiff winged hat. He found a Swiss watch at Spritzer and Fuhrmann, and was surprised at how inexpensive it was. He bought it for his brother Ted and smiled as he thought of Ted's face when he saw it.

As they walked along, Uncle Charlie kept up a running fire of conversation, giving Biff a good picture of life in Curaçao.

"All the houses are different colors, Uncle Charlie. Why is that?" Biff asked.

Each house was distinct from the other, even if its color varied by only a shade. Some were light pink, others darker pink. There were bright green-painted houses, and light green ones. Others were different shades of blue and yellow.

Uncle Charlie chuckled before replying.

"Don't know how true this story is, Biff, but here's the natives' explanation of why the houses here are so gaily colored. Many years ago, all the houses here were whitewashed. It seems the unrelieved glare of all the white houses hurt the governor's eyes. So, being a powerful man who knew what he wanted, he ordered the houses to be painted the colors of their owners' choices. Simple as that."

"If you're a governor," Biff replied, laughing.

"And you see that large building over there?" Uncle Charlie pointed to a magnificent structure standing on top of a hill.

"Big enough to be a palace," Biff commented.

"It's Franklin D. Roosevelt House, the United States consulate. The Dutch built it up there on Ararat Hill to express their thanks for our protection of these Dutch islands during World War II."

"That was really nice of them."

“Good neighbors, the Dutch.”

Biff stopped in front of a store displaying beautiful English china and Swedish crystal. He pretended to be inspecting these beautiful wares. Actually he was listening intently to a rapid-fire conversation between two native clerks.

“I don’t get it,” Biff said, shaking his head.

“What don’t you get?”

“The language they’re speaking. I thought at first it was Spanish. I know I caught some Spanish words. And some English words. And I could pick out some Portuguese, too. But it’s all so mixed up.”

Uncle Charlie laughed. “No wonder you’re puzzled. They’re speaking a language made up of more different languages than any other in the world. It’s called Papiamentu. The jargon is a combination of Dutch, English, Spanish, Portuguese, African, and Indian words. Carib Indians. A few French words thrown in, too.”

“Just like Curaçao itself.”

“That’s right, Biff. This island is filled with many races although the Dutch are predominant.”

Uncle Charlie looked at his watch, then glanced up at the sun. “Aren’t you getting hungry? It’s after noon,” he said.

“Now that you remind me,” Biff replied with a grin, “I’m starving.”

“Like to go back to the hotel, or how about some real Dutch-Japanese food? Dutch cooking is good. Heavy, though.”

“Lead me to it.”

Uncle Charlie took his nephew to Koreman’s Old Dutch Tavern on Columbusstraat. They started out with a delicious Dutch pea soup, for which the restaurant is famous, and followed it with a Japanese dish of pork and vegetables with a thick curry sauce.

“Like it, Biff?”

“Delicious. But, as you said—heavy. I’m so full now, I don’t think I’ll ever want to eat again.”

“This stuff really sticks to your ribs. But if I know you, you’ll be starving again in a few hours. Come on, we’ll go back to the hotel. You must have some questions buzzing in your brain.”

Uncle Charlie Spins a Yarn

“Make yourself comfortable, Biff,” Uncle Charlie invited, when they were back in his room at the Del Mar. “You must be tired. Night flight, exciting morning. Get much sleep on the plane?”

“Few hours. I think that food made me sleepier than anything, though. Boy, am I glad to get this coat off! Too tight for my taste.”

Biff took off Derek’s coat, which he had been wearing, and tossed it toward a chair. As the coat landed, a small white box fell out of the pocket. Uncle Charlie pounced on it like a hungry cat on a mouse.

“What is it, Uncle Charlie?” Biff asked.

Charlie had taken the lid off the box and was inspecting the object in it with a triumphant smile on his face.

“What luck! I think this will clinch our case against Dietz and Company. And at the same time, I can see now why Derek might be very suspicious of both of us.”

Uncle Charlie put the lid back on the box and replaced it in Derek’s coat.

“You still haven’t told me what it is,” Biff said.

“Give me time. And when I do, a lot of things will become clear.”

“So, Uncle Charlie is going to be mysterious again,” Biff said to himself. Biff sprawled out on the bed and waited for Uncle Charlie to start talking.

“It all goes back to our days in Burma and China, Biff. You know Explorations Unlimited still has its headquarters in Burma. Sumatra’s not too far from Burma. Lots of Dutch people in Sumatra. It was once

a Dutch colony. And Explorations had done quite a bit of work for some of the Dutch businessmen there.

“Just after we had to get out of Burma—you remember, of course—Explorations received an inquiry as to whether its operations extended to the Netherlands Antilles. Jack Hudson—you recall him, don’t you, Biff?—cabled me.”

Biff nodded his head. Jack Hudson also worked for Explorations Unlimited. It had been Jack who had flown into China and rescued Biff and his uncle when Biff had taken part in the *Mystery of the Chinese Ring*.

“So Jack cabled me,” Uncle Charlie went on. “An inquiry had come from a friend of Derek’s father, Brom Zook. Brom wanted someone to work for and with him. I got the job. I’d picked up a seaplane with my earnings in China and had been kicking around the Caribbean, charter flights and so on.”

“What did he want you to do?” Biff asked.

“Pilot him back and forth from here to Martinique. Run a speedboat he has in Martinique.”

“I know from what Dietz told me that Derek’s father is looking for something on the bottom of the ocean? What is it? Sunken treasure?” Biff asked.

“In a way, yes. And he’s found it, too. It’s a pearl fishery—”

“Pearl fishery!” Biff’s voice showed his excitement.

“Yes. A fabulous one. If the samples Brom has found so far are an indication, there are millions of dollars of pearls waiting to be taken, from a spot of ocean floor just off the coast of Martinique.”

Biff was sitting up now, leaning forward. This was fascinating to him. Pearls, taken from the bottom of the ocean!

“It was the very end of November, I guess, when I last saw Brom,” Charles Keene said. “I’d taken some new skin-diving equipment over

to him. He indicated to me then that he thought he was nearing his goal. He said I'd hear from him within a week. I was to come back to Curaçao and await word."

"Why Curaçao, Uncle Charlie, when he was working in a French possession?"

"Because he's a Dutch citizen. Everything he does over there has to clear through the Dutch authorities and the French consulate here."

"I see," Biff nodded his head.

"Well, nearly two weeks went by. I was worried. I flew back to Martinique. I couldn't locate Brom. He had gone to sea in his speedboat, loaded with supplies. I hung around La Trinité—that's the town we headquartered in—for a couple of days, then came back here. Nothing else for me to do."

Uncle Charlie got out of his chair and walked over to the balcony.

"Then I got a letter and a package from Brom," Uncle Charlie continued. "And that's the last I've heard from him. Oh, I've been back to Martinique several times, but he's vanished."

"Do you think Dietz had anything to do with it?"

"I'm sure of it, Biff. He either kidnapped Brom Zook, and Brom got away, or he drove Brom into hiding. It's just got to be one or the other."

"Dietz knew about this pearl fishery, too?" Biff wanted to know.

"Lots of people know about it, Biff. Stories of a fabulous pearl fishery have been circulating in these parts for years and years. The stories come from the Carib Indians. And every once in a while, a Carib comes to the market with a priceless pearl."

"But no one has ever located the fishery, is that it?"

"That's right, Biff. Many have tried, Dietz among them."

"Where does Derek fit into the picture?" Biff asked.

"I'm coming to that. Derek is motherless. He has spent most of his life divided between living here in Curaçao with his father and living with his grandparents in Holland. When Brom Zook started on his hunt for the pearl fishery, he sent Derek to The Netherlands for his schooling. He knew that he wouldn't be in Curaçao much of the time, and he didn't like to leave Derek alone."

"Why did Derek come back? Particularly since his father is missing?" The picture was still somewhat cloudy to Biff.

"I sent for him," Uncle Charlie said.

"And you sent for me, too. Why both of us?"

"Because you look so much alike. You could easily pass for twins."

"I know," Biff said. "In Miami and on the plane, we were taken for twins."

"I needed you here in the event Derek didn't show up in time."

"In time for what, Uncle Charlie?"

"To establish his right to the pearl fishery his father has found."

Biff frowned. "I'm afraid I still don't get it."

"It's like this, Biff. The letter I received from Brom Zook, over two weeks after I last saw him, contained a claim to a certain water area, to be filed with the French consulate here in Willemstad, establishing Brom Zook as the discoverer of the fishery. I was to file it for him. Along with the letter and the claim, I received a small package. In it was one of the most perfect black pearls I have ever seen."

Biff's eyes turned in the direction of Derek's coat. He was beginning to get an idea of what Uncle Charlie had found in the box that had tumbled from the jacket.

"This pearl was to be given the French consul along with the claim. In

the event Brom Zook didn't appear within the time limit, the person appearing for him could establish his right by presenting a black pearl that was the perfect match for the one I left with the consulate."

"And that person would be Derek?" Biff asked.

"Right you are, Biff."

"How did Derek get hold of the pearl?"

"Apparently Brom Zook knew he was in danger, from Dietz, I'm sure. Dietz would try to stop him from appearing to establish his claim—the same way claim jumpers used to operate in the early mining days of the old West in the United States," Uncle Charlie explained.

"So he sent Derek the other pearl?"

"That's right. He told me he had done so in his letter. His instructions were that if he didn't get in touch with me in plenty of time before the ninety-day time limit was to expire, then I was to cable Derek to come at once to Curaçao."

"Ninety-day time limit? I don't understand," Biff said, his voice showing he was still puzzled.

"When a claim is filed, such as the one I filed for Brom Zook, there's a waiting period of ninety days before the claim is granted. The law was designed to prevent claim jumping. In those ninety days, if anyone else can dispute the claim, then a hearing is held to decide who discovered the find first."

"So that if Brom Zook had jumped someone else's claim, the real discoverer could protest and prove he made the discovery first," Biff said.

"You're right, Biff. But in this case, Brom made the discovery. Dietz knows it. Dietz knows that he wouldn't stand a chance of claiming to have made the discovery first."

"Why not?"

“Because he doesn’t know exactly where it is.”

“Do you, Uncle Charlie?”

“I have a pretty good idea, because I know more precisely where Brom Zook was working than Dietz does. You see, Biff, a claim to a water area covers a *lot* of ocean. It isn’t like a land claim for mining. A mining claim covers a specific spot. A water claim can cover an area of hundreds of acres. I know the island group that Brom was searching in, but only Brom knows the exact spot where the pearl oysters are located.”

“Then the pearl fishery itself,” Biff said, “could be a very small area compared to the total area covered by the claim?”

“Right you are, Biff.”

“Then Dietz hasn’t got a chance, has he?”

“Oh, yes. He thinks he has a good one.”

“I don’t see how.”

Charlie Keene grinned. “If neither Brom Zook nor Derek appears at the French consulate to demand the claim within the ninety days, anyone can file for the rights. Dietz is just waiting to file in the same general area where the Zook claim is located.”

Biff knew now what had happened.

“And Brom Zook is missing.”

“That’s it, Biff. If neither Brom Zook nor Derek appears, then Dietz moves in, files his claim, and then it would be most difficult for Brom Zook to reestablish his rights.”

Biff nodded his head thoughtfully.

“Uncle Charlie, when does that ninety-day time limit expire?”

“Tomorrow afternoon, Biff. At four o’clock.”

“What!” Biff exclaimed. “Then we’ve got to act fast. We’ve got to find Derek!”

“Don’t worry, Biff, we’re still ahead of the game.”

“But Brom Zook will be robbed!”

“I don’t think so,” Uncle Charlie said, smiling as he shook his head.

“What’s to prevent it?” Biff demanded.

“You, Biff. Couldn’t you play the role of Derek Zook once more?”

CHAPTER IX

Outmatched

Biff was taken aback by his uncle's last statement.

"You mean if we don't find Derek, you want me to substitute for him?"

"That sums it up, Biff."

Biff shook his head. He knew he looked like Derek. But Uncle Charlie was really asking a lot.

"Gosh, Uncle Charlie. It's one thing for me to substitute for Derek when it's only a joke. Like at the airport. But to do this—this is for big stakes."

"I know, Biff. But, considering the fact that you will actually be doing this so the just rights of a man will be established, I don't think you would be doing anything morally wrong."

"No, I guess not. We would be stopping Dietz from stealing what belongs to someone else."

"That's right, Biff."

"Still—suppose I have to sign something? That would be forgery. I couldn't do that, Uncle Charlie."

"I know you couldn't, Biff. And I wouldn't ask you to. But I've looked into this affair as closely as I can. I don't think you'll be required to sign anything. The signing for the actual working permit to the claim will take place in Martinique."

"I sure hope you're right."

"I'm rather certain that I am, Biff. Otherwise there wouldn't have been

much point in my having you come down here in such a hurry.”

“And my being here gives you more time to find Brom Zook.”

“Or Derek, now that he is here.”

“I wonder why he didn’t get here sooner,” Biff pondered.

“You can bet that really had me worried. I waited until just over three weeks ago before I cabled for Derek to come here. That would be plenty of time, now that the Atlantic can be crossed in hours instead of days.”

“Didn’t you get a reply to your cable?”

“No. That didn’t worry me too much. I just figured that Derek would know how serious things had become. His father must have given him a clear picture of the situation when he wrote him.”

“Why didn’t Derek come as soon as you cabled?”

“I got a cable about ten days after I sent for Derek. It was from his grandfather. The cable informed me that Derek was in the Swiss Alps for winter skiing. The grandfather had tried and tried to locate him. It seems Derek was off on a long cross-country ski race. You know, where the winner is the one who covers the most miles in a given number of days.”

“Be hard to locate someone on one of those jaunts, all right,” Biff agreed.

“So, being desperate, and not knowing if Derek would get here before the time limit expired, I cabled for you. And was I ever glad to see you come through the door of the terminal!”

“But you actually had the real Derek.”

Uncle Charlie laughed. “That’s right. But from the way things have gone, it’s a good thing I do have two Dereks.”

* * * * *

The hands on the clock in the hearing room of the French consulate showed fifteen minutes of four. Seated in the first of the row of benches which lined the room were Herman Dietz and Specks Cade. Dietz wore a satisfied smile on his face. Things were going fine. Just fine. Fifteen more minutes, and Brom Zook's claim would be worthless, voided by the expiration of the ninety-day time limit.

Specks's feelings were just the opposite of Dietz's. He was nervous. He kept shifting back and forth on the bench, looking at the entrance, watching the clock.

Ten minutes of four.

The claims referee finished some business with the only other person left in the room. He looked down from his bench at Dietz.

"You have business with the Claims Division?"

"Yes, sir. I have a claim to file."

"Then let's have it. It grows late," the referee said impatiently.

"I will when it becomes four o'clock," Dietz said. "It would not be proper for me to file my claim when there is still time for my friend Brom Zook to appear to ask for his."

The referee looked down at the paper in front of him. He picked it up.

"Oh, yes. Brom Zook. I have it here." He glanced at the clock.

Five minutes to four.

A dead silence came over the hearing room. Three men kept their eyes on the clock. Even Dietz fidgeted somewhat as the minute hand came nearer and nearer to the hour hand. Only three minutes and he would win.

The sound of feet striding briskly and firmly came from the rear of the room. Dietz swung around. His face went white. His heart pounded. It couldn't be. It was impossible! Derek Zook was a prisoner guarded by Crunch. Crunch was a simple-minded soul, but a powerful man. Derek

Zook couldn't have escaped!

Biff Brewster came striding down the aisle.

The referee looked up. "And what is the matter concerning you that brings you before this Claims Division?" he asked.

"The matter of the claim to a pearl fishery, made by Brom Zook of Curaçao, sir," Biff said.

The referee picked up some papers.

"You can establish your right to the claim?"

Biff nodded his head.

Charles Keene came down the aisle and stood by his nephew.

"I see by a letter which accompanies this claim that you must meet a certain requirement in order to establish your right beyond any doubt."

Biff cast a quick glance at his uncle. Charles Keene said nothing. The clerk went on:

"Brom Zook has accompanied his filing of a claim asking to be granted the rights to fish for pearls in certain waters off the Island of Martinique, with an object which must be matched by any claimant other than himself. Since I know you are not Brom Zook, you must present this object to establish yourself as the rightful claimant to the grant. You have it, young man?"

Momentarily Biff panicked. Where had he put the pearl? Then he felt his uncle nudge him. "Your inside coat pocket, Biff," Charles Keene whispered.

Biff's hand shot into his coat pocket.

"The object referred to," the referee went on, "is a pearl. A black pearl that must match perfectly the one I hold here."

At these words, Dietz raised an eyebrow and smirked. He was positive no such pearl existed. If it did, Derek didn't have it. He had searched Derek carefully. No pearl had been found.

Biff's hand touched the small box. He pulled it out and stepped forward to the referee's bench.

"Here, sir." Biff said, holding the beautiful pearl in the palm of his hand.

The referee took it. Biff couldn't resist turning around to see Dietz's reaction. Dietz was grasping Specks's arm. He seemed about to faint. He swallowed several times, shaking his head as if trying to remove from his vision something he couldn't believe he was seeing.

The referee was examining the two pearls closely.

"Everything seems to be in order. There can be no doubt that these are matching pearls. Beautiful ones, too. My congratulations to you, young man, and to your father. He has truly made a discovery of great beauty and value."

The referee placed the papers in a thick manila envelope and handed them over to Biff. "And now, seeing that no one else is here to present a claim, I declare the Claims Division closed for the day," he said.

Biff joined his uncle, and the two strode happily toward the exit. At the door, they turned and looked back. Dietz was slumped back against the bench. Specks hovered over him like a nervous mother hen.

Plan of Action

Two happier people couldn't be found among the gay crowds of tourists swarming the streets of Willemstad than Biff Brewster and Charlie Keene. They were standing at the bottom of the steps leading from the French consulate.

"We pulled it off, Biff. We really outfoxed Dietz," Charlie said exultantly.

"We sure did. But I was kind of shaky in there for a few moments. I mean when the referee asked about the matching pearl."

Uncle Charlie laughed. "You felt like the best man at the wedding who forgot where he had put the ring, eh?"

Biff and his uncle had spent all their time before appearing at the Claims Division in looking for Derek. They had gone to the Zook home, long closed since Brom Zook had been in Martinique and Derek in Holland. They thought the boy might have gone there to hide.

They had also inquired at a small boarding house where Brom Zook had stayed on his infrequent trips to Curaçao. No sign or word of Derek anywhere. They had come to the conclusion that Dietz must be holding the Dutch boy.

"Yep, Biff, we've established Brom Zook's rights to the claim, and we've got the matching pearls. Pretty good day's work, I'd say. Couldn't have done it without you, though. My compliments to you, Biff-Derek-Zook-Brewster."

Biff laughed. "I'd like to get back to being just Biff Brewster again. Impersonating Derek Zook gets pretty rough at times."

Uncle Charlie wasn't listening. Biff had given him the papers establishing the claim and the two pearls. Uncle Charlie was

examining the pearls.

“Real beauties, aren’t they? And valuable, too.”

“What do you think they’re worth, Uncle Charlie?”

“Hmmm ... several thousand dollars at least. They’d make a perfect pair of earrings for some exotic movie star or Italian countess or a member of the British nobility. Not worth a big fortune, but a considerable one. A pearl collector would probably want them at any price named.”

“And there’s plenty more where they came from,” Biff suggested.

“You’re right, there are.”

Biff was quiet. His thoughts were now back on Derek. True, he and his uncle had preserved Derek and his father’s pearl fishery claim, but unless they could find Derek and Brom Zook, what they had done so far was valueless.

“Uncle Charlie, we’ve just got to find Derek now.”

Charles Keene frowned. “I know it, Biff.”

“We can’t let Dietz find out that it wasn’t Derek who appeared before the claims referee. If he does, he could upset our applecart but good.”

“Yes. And it still has to be the real Derek who signs for the working permit in Martinique. Your impersonation can’t go to the extreme of signing Derek’s name.”

Biff glanced down the street. His eyes came to rest on the sleek, black limousine which had brought Dietz to the Claims Division. It was the same car in which Biff had ridden from the airport to the hotel. Looking at it gave Biff an idea.

“Look, Uncle Charlie. If Dietz did get Derek, he must still be holding him. Right?”

His uncle nodded his head in agreement.

“Although he doesn’t know it, of course, since he saw me in the Claims office, and thought I was Derek—”

“Go on, Biff, I think I’m reading you louder and your upcoming idea is getting clearer.”

“Thinking, as he must be, that Derek somehow escaped, wouldn’t he let his guard down now? He must figure the game is almost up.”

“Yes, that’s how I’d figure it myself,” Charlie replied. “And how wrong I’d be!”

“Exactly. So, believing Derek must have escaped, wouldn’t Dietz feel it no longer necessary to take any precautions in returning to his hide-out?”

“I get you, Biff. Following him ought to be a cinch now.”

“What are we waiting for then? Let’s get in your car and wait for Dietz and Specks to come out.”

The two walked over to Charlie Keene’s small, low-slung, two-seater sports car. They climbed in and waited. Keene’s car was parked four cars removed from the black limousine. The cars intervening gave Biff and his uncle a good spot from which to observe, without too much chance of being seen themselves.

Five minutes passed before a dejected Dietz and his pal Specks came out of the building. They got into the limousine, Specks at the wheel, and pulled away. Uncle Charlie started up his car and slipped into the thick traffic behind. There was little chance of their pursuing car being noticed by Dietz in the crowded downtown streets.

As Dietz’s limousine reached the northern outskirts of the city, traffic thinned. Charlie dropped back half a block, still keeping the black car within easy vision.

Once the city was left behind, Specks speeded up. The limousine roared along the road. Charlie let it pull away although he didn’t have to. His sports car was much the faster of the two.

“Aren’t you afraid we’ll lose him, Uncle Charlie?” Biff asked, worried.

“Not a chance, Biff. This road goes only one place. The end of the island. No major turnoffs. If we stick too close on his tail, he might spot us. I just want to keep the car in sight.”

They remained a good half mile behind the black car. Each time it rounded a curve and disappeared from sight, Biff’s worries increased. But each time, as his uncle rounded the same curve, Biff was relieved to see the black car ahead. Charlie kept the same distance between the cars.

“Look, Uncle Charlie,” Biff cried out suddenly. “He’s turning off.”

Charlie Keene nodded his head and tramped down heavily on the accelerator. The sports car leaped ahead. It roared down the road, rapidly closing the gap to the spot the black car had turned off. As they neared it, Charlie slowed. They came to a jagged road, angling off to the right.

“That’s where they turned,” Biff said.

Charlie nodded his head, but kept on going.

“Aren’t you going to turn in?” Biff asked anxiously.

“Not right away. We’re too close behind them.”

Charlie continued on down the paved road for a quarter of a mile, then U-turned and came back. He cut to the left into the rough road they had just passed, pulled up, and cut his motor.

Biff and Charlie got out. Charlie went ahead, inspecting the road. It was composed of sand and crushed shells.

“This is it, Biff. I’m positive. See those deep tracks? Hasn’t been time for the sand to have shifted and run back to fill them in. These roads with sand show tracks much as a snow-covered road does.”

Biff was convinced. Not only by his uncle’s skill at picking out fresh tracks, but because he hadn’t seen any other road in that vicinity. It

had to be the road the black car had just turned down.

“Let’s figure our next move, Biff,” Charlie said. The two got back into the sports car.

“I think I know where we are. There used to be a big estate somewhere around here. It’s been closed up for some years. There’s one large house, a hacienda, and several smaller outbuildings. An ideal place to hide out, particularly if you wanted to hold someone prisoner. Let’s put our plotting machine to work for a few minutes.”

At first, Biff was all for barging right ahead, crashing right in and demanding of Dietz the whereabouts of Derek.

“Don’t think we’d better do that, Biff,” Uncle Charlie said. “We don’t know how many cohorts Dietz might have. He’s bound to have a servant or two. Particularly since he had to have someone to keep a sharp eye on Derek.”

“I see what you mean, Uncle Charlie. What’s your plan of action?” Biff asked.

“I’ll go up to the hacienda by myself. I can keep Dietz plenty busy with questions and accusations for a while. That will give you time to scout around the outbuildings and search for Derek.”

“But won’t Dietz want to find out how Derek got away?”

“Perhaps. But since Dietz thinks he is gone, what good will it do him to worry about locking the gate now that his prize has fled?”

Biff nodded his head. Then another thought came to him.

“But won’t the guard who let Derek get away be so worried and scared he’ll report to Dietz at once?” Biff asked.

“Whoa, there, my boy. You’re beginning to think like Dietz. Why should the guard be upset? He still has Derek, hasn’t he?”

“I forgot, Uncle Charlie,” Biff said sheepishly.

“Okay, let’s move on.”

They drove for about two miles along the winding sand-shell road until they came to the arched opening in the pink-stone wall.

“This is where we part for a while,” Uncle Charlie said. “I’ll drive on up to the hacienda. You wait until you see me enter. Then make like a beagle and sniff out the other buildings fast.” Charlie looked at his watch. “I’ve got six-fifteen. How ’bout you?”

“The same.”

“Okay, Biff. We’ll rendezvous outside this gate at exactly six forty-five. It will still be light by then. But darkness comes fast. Night falls as fast as a theater curtain in the tropics. One minute it’s daylight. The next it’s dark. Dusk lasts about one minute. All set?”

“Right. And I hope you see double when we rendezvous.”

“See double?” Uncle Charlie was momentarily puzzled.

“Derek *and* me,” Biff said, grinning.

“Oh. I get you. Guess I’d stopped thinking clearly for a moment this time. Good luck, Biff.”

Charles Keene started the car and drove toward the hacienda.

Biff waited until he saw him enter the building. When the door closed behind his uncle, Biff, keeping close to the wall, started out on his bird-dogging expedition.

Fortunately for Biff, the grounds had been landscaped. Palm trees, low palmetto bushes, and flower gardens, now filled with rank, weedy growth, gave him plenty of cover to scout around.

The first two buildings he inspected were empty. A third, smaller building, well removed from the main house, looked like the next likely place. As Biff approached it, he noticed that the windows of the building were barred.



Biff noticed that the windows of the building were barred

Biff crept silently up to the building. He pressed close to the wall of

the stone house and worked his way around to its rear. Cautiously he raised his head until his eyes were at the level of the window. He looked into the room.

Once more he was looking at himself in a mirror. This time Derek's expression was even more startled than when the two boys had first met at the Miami airport.

Biff Meets Crunch

Biff quickly pressed a forefinger against his lips. If Derek, startled as he was, made an outcry, any chance of freeing him would be gone.

Derek was seated on the edge of a small cot. The only other furniture in the room was a straight chair. Biff could see through a narrow opening into the second of the two rooms which made up the small stone house. The entrance to this house-prison must be in the other room, Biff figured.

Derek arose and came quietly to the window.

"Biff! You found me!" Derek sounded as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

"And I've got to get you out of here. Fast," Biff whispered.

"But tell me, Biff, what has happened? I'm all confused. I have to know—"

"No time now," Biff replied. "If I can't get you out of here right away, you'll be in real trouble. Are you alone here, or are you being guarded?"

"There's a guard right in the other room," Derek whispered back.

Biff's face fell. He had expected Derek to be under guard, but he'd hoped the guard wouldn't be so close by.

"No way of slipping past him, I suppose?" Biff said.

"I would have little or no chance. The guard is a giant."

"Have you been treated all right?" Biff asked.

"Oh, yes. The guard, while big enough to crush me with his bare hands, is really quite a simple soul. He's friendly too, as long as I don't try anything," Derek went on.

"And he stays here all the time? Never leaves you alone?" Biff pressed his questions hurriedly. There wasn't much time before he was to rejoin his uncle.

"No, Biff. He goes to the main house for my meals and his." Derek looked at his watch. "He'll be going any minute now. At six-thirty."

"How can you be sure he'll go at six-thirty?"

Derek grinned. "It would be funny if I weren't a prisoner. My guard—his name is Crunch—can't read. Can't even tell time. He has me set an alarm clock for when it's time for him to go get our food. When the alarm goes off, we eat."

"And you set it for six-thirty." Biff said this half aloud. His thoughts were racing as a plan was shaping up in his mind.

"Listen closely, Derek."

The Dutch boy grasped the iron bars of the window in his hands and pulled himself nearer to Biff. Their heads were only inches apart.

"Do you remember an arched gateway leading into this place?"

"Yes. I remember it."

"I'm to meet my Uncle Charlie there at six forty-five. He's up at the hacienda, stalling Dietz. Here's my plan. It ought to work, too, if Crunch is as simple-minded as you say he is." Biff's voice was a low, rapid whisper.

"Think it will work, Derek?" he finished.

"It should. I just hope you don't get hurt."

"Don't you worry about me. You just make for that gate as fast as you can if you get out. Wait for my uncle. If I'm not there by the time you

two meet, both of you go on ahead. Forget about me.”

Derek’s frown showed that he didn’t like the possibility that Biff might get caught. His “But Biff—” was cut short by the sharp ringing of an alarm clock bell.

Biff pulled quickly away from the window. He moved quietly but speedily until he stood concealed just behind the front wall of the small building. He poked his head around the corner, saw the doorway only six feet away, then drew back.

Moments passed. Biff heard the sound of a key grating in a lock. Again he poked his head cautiously around the corner of the building. He saw the door swing outward. Next he saw the guard come out. Biff gasped. Never had he seen a man of such tremendous size. Derek was right. This man was a giant! Big powerful shoulders topped a strong, barrel-shaped torso. His large head, thatched with shaggy hair, was out-size even on so massive a body. Biff shuddered to think what his fate might be if Crunch ever got his hands on him. And that was just what might happen. Biff was going to deliberately try to get Crunch to attack him.

Crunch swung the door closed. He started to put the key back in the lock. Biff acted.

“No use locking the door, Crunch,” he said, hoping the big man would not notice he was not dressed like Derek. “I’m out here.”

Crunch, startled, turned in Biff’s direction. He stared with his mouth agape like a child seeing something for the first time; seeing something that just couldn’t be.

“Yes, Crunch, I got out the back window,” Biff said.

Crunch turned bewilderedly to look through the door, as if expecting to see Biff in the act of escaping. He turned his head back to Biff. Biff took a step back. He cringed, pretending to be frightened. Actually, he didn’t have to pretend too much. The size of the man alone was enough to frighten anyone.

Crunch was still confused. He took a step toward Biff, then looked

back at the unlocked door. He made a motion as if he were going to lock it.

Biff withdrew another few feet. He wanted the big man to chase him. It took Crunch a little time to figure out the situation. Then, as he saw Biff move farther away from him, he made up his mind. He lunged toward Biff. Biff turned and ran.

The plan was working out fine. Derek would have plenty of time and opportunity to get out of his jail and head for the gateway.

Everything was fine with one exception. Suppose Crunch overtook Biff? The boy could almost feel the massive arms of the giant closing around him. Crunch's grasp would be as powerful as that of a boa constrictor.

Running in the mixture of sand and shell was difficult. Biff felt he was making no progress. It was like racing on a treadmill. Running was even harder for the giant. His long strides, his great weight forced his feet deep into the soft under-footing, slowing him more than it did Biff.

Biff had headed directly away from the big house and Derek's recent prison. He wanted to draw Crunch as far away as possible.

Biff could still hear the big man pounding after him. The distance between them was widening. Biff halted, took refuge behind a thick palmetto bush and waited. He could hear Crunch coming on. As he came nearer, the big man's breathing was loud. He was gasping for breath. The sand was his real enemy. It held him back, sapped him of his great strength.

Crunch passed within a few feet of where Biff was hiding. He continued at a staggering run. When Biff felt he was a hundred or more feet away, he crept out from beneath his sheltering bush and struck out for the gateway.

Biff glanced at his watch. It was already six forty-five. Had Derek made it? Had Uncle Charlie been able to get away without Dietz's watching him? If he had, then he and Derek already would have met.

Suddenly it began to grow darker. Biff welcomed the quick nightfall. It gave him more cover. When he reached the gate, he welcomed the darkness even more.

Derek and Uncle Charlie were gone.

Double Chance

The sudden nightfall, the quick spread of darkness, was most fortunate for Biff. He selected a secluded spot not far from the arched gateway and holed in to catch his breath and figure out his next move.

Biff was very well pleased with the way he had tricked the giant Crunch. Derek had escaped. He must have met Uncle Charlie. The problem now was—how was Biff going to rejoin them?

As he sat on the warm sand, wondering if he should start the long walk back to Willemstad, he heard shouts and angry voices coming from the main house.

A knife of light cut into the darkness as the door opened. Out at a run came Dietz, Specks, and Crunch.

“Get the car, Specks,” Dietz’s order rang out. “Crunch and I will search the grounds. Meet us at the gate.”

Biff’s first idea at hearing the words was to move out fast, put as much distance as possible between him and the main house and the searchers.

Then a second idea came to him. It was a daring idea. It was a dangerous one. He decided to wait and see if he could put his plan into effect.

Two sweeping streaks of light told Biff that Specks was on his way to the gate in the car. It pulled up and stopped just outside the gate, not more than ten feet from Biff’s place of concealment.

Biff could hear Dietz and Crunch thrashing about in the underbrush.

“All right, Crunch,” Biff heard Dietz shout. “They’re not here. Come

on to the gate.”

Moments later Biff saw Dietz join Specks by the front of the car. They stood in the glare of its headlights.

“That stupid fool!” Dietz said angrily. “I don’t know whether to believe him or not. Do you think he was seeing things?”

“Look, boss, Crunch is stupid. He’s *too* stupid to dream up a story like that.”

“Maybe you’re right. But why would that Zook kid come back here after he had escaped?”

“You got me, boss. Unless he hid something there and came back for it.”

“What? What would he have left when he got away? It just doesn’t make any sense.”

Biff smiled at Dietz’s confusion. “It sure doesn’t make sense—to you, Mr. Dietz,” he said to himself.

“And I don’t get Keene’s coming out here,” Dietz went on. “He certainly doesn’t think I’d tell him where Brom Zook is. He’s not that dumb.”

“Yeah—you wouldn’t tell him even if you knew,” Specks replied.

That was a piece of information valuable to Biff. Now he knew for certain that Dietz didn’t know where Derek’s father was. Nobody seemed to know.

“Mighty tough on Derek,” Biff said to himself.

The giant Crunch came up.

“Get in, you big lug,” Dietz commanded. “In the front, stupid, with Specks.” There was anger in Dietz’s voice. But no fear. Biff wondered why the giant Carib Indian stood such verbal abuse. He could tear Dietz apart.

Dietz climbed in, and Specks put the car in gear. It started off slowly. Biff went into action. Doubled up, running low, he overtook the car, hopped onto the rear bumper, and grasped the trunk handle. This was a dangerous thing to do. Biff realized it. But what better chance did he have of getting away, and getting away fast?

Biff appreciated the humor of the situation, too. Here was Dietz out looking for him, and all the time only the length of the limousine's trunk lid separated the two.

"My enemy is giving me a lift to town," Biff chuckled. "Darned nice of him."

Biff had to hold on tight as the car gained speed. It lurched and careened around the sharp turns of the curving road. By the time Specks reached the paved highway, Biff had had enough. He knew he couldn't be hurt too much if he were thrown off the car on the sand road. But if he fell off on a paved highway with the car going at high speed, he could be seriously injured.

He also realized that a following car would spot him easily, hanging onto the trunk.

As Specks slowed to turn onto the main highway, Biff dropped off the car and skipped over to the side of the road. The limousine headed for Willemstad.

"Now what?" Biff asked himself. "Do they pick up hitchhikers in Curaçao?" He walked out to the main road. He was just in time to see the taillights of the limousine disappear as the car rounded a curve.

Biff was startled by the sound of another car starting, just a short distance up the road in the opposite direction from Willemstad. The car's lights came on. It headed toward Biff. Biff stepped back into the darkness. The car came at the dirt road gaining speed. Its tires screeched as the driver cut sharply off the paved road onto the dirt one.

Biff recognized the car.

"Hey! Uncle Charlie!" Biff shouted at the top of his voice as the sports

car shot passed him. At first, Biff didn't think his shout had been heard over the sound of the car's engine. Then the car braked sharply. Biff ran up to it.

Charlie Keene hopped out.

"You're okay, Biff? Crunch didn't get you?"

"See for yourself, Uncle Charlie. I got away all right."

Derek joined them.

"A million thanks to you, Biff. And a million more pardons for my ever having suspected you or your uncle."

"Forget it, Derek. I don't blame you for being suspicious. How could you help it when I even had your pearl?"

"Well, Biff, to be truthful, I did think for a while that maybe the real reason you wanted me to impersonate you at the airport was so you could get my coat."

"That's one joke I won't be trying again for a long, long time."

"It turned out for the good, though, didn't it?" Derek replied. "Dietz still doesn't know there are two of us. Either two Dereks or two Biffs."

The boys laughed.

"How'd you know I'd be here?" Biff asked his uncle.

"I didn't, Biff. I was afraid Crunch might have caught you. So was Derek. I was pretty sure that Dietz would head back for Willemstad as soon as I left."

"What made you so sure?"

"I told Dietz that I'd left Derek there. If Dietz can prevent Derek from getting to Martinique, he still has a chance to jump the Zook claim."

"Because I have to sign the permit for the working permit, Biff," Derek said.

Biff was thinking fast. Another plan was developing in his mind.

“Look, Uncle Charlie,” he said, “If you and Derek could get to Martinique without Dietz, it would be a good break, wouldn’t it?”

“The best ever, Biff. What’ve you got in mind?”

“Suppose I take Derek’s place again.”

“You can’t, Biff. You can’t sign those papers. That would be forgery,” Charles Keene reminded him.

“Oh, I don’t mean that I’d go to Martinique,” Biff said.

“What are you getting at?” Uncle Charlie demanded.

“Suppose I go back to the hacienda? When Dietz and Company return, Dietz will think he still has Derek under his thumb, and that would give you and Derek plenty of time to get set up in Martinique.”

Uncle Charlie didn’t reply at once. He was considering Biff’s daring plan.

“Don’t like it, Biff. It would work out well for us, sure. But you might get hurt. I’m thinking of Crunch.”

“Oh, come on now, Uncle Charlie. I’ve been in tighter spots than the one I’ve described.” Biff spoke boldly, confidently. His inner feelings didn’t match his spoken optimism. “Derek tells me Crunch is really a gentle person.”

“Except when he’s aroused,” Derek cut in. “He didn’t harm me. Not once. But one time when I tried to follow him when he went for our meals, he picked me up and threw me on the cot as if I were a small puppy.”

“Believe me, Uncle Charlie, I have no intention of antagonizing Crunch,” Biff assured him. “And I’ll think up some reason for being there.”

Uncle Charlie rubbed his jaw. “Well, Biff, I still don’t like the idea at

all. But it surely would give us the time we need. We've got to get the working permit. And I've got to fuel my seaplane."

"You're weakening, aren't you, Uncle Charlie?"

"I guess I am, Biff. I'll come back for you in a couple of days. Dietz will free you once I convince him you aren't the real Derek Zook."

"Good. We'll do it then. But before I go back to the hacienda and surrender myself, I could use some FOOD! How about you, Derek? Hungry? You missed your nightly feed."

"I'm with you, Biff."

"I know an eating place not too far from here," Uncle Charlie said. "Let's go. Dietz won't be back for a couple of hours anyway."

An hour and a half later, Uncle Charlie and Derek dropped Biff off at the sand-shell road leading to the hacienda.

"Lots of luck, Biff," Uncle Charlie said, placing an affectionate hand on his nephew's shoulder.

"My best wishes go with you, too, Biff," Derek said, holding out his hand. "And my thanks for all you have done and are going to do."

Biff watched the sports car head toward Curaçao. Then he turned and walked down the starlit road. He didn't feel quite so brave with his uncle and Derek gone. He couldn't know how Dietz would react when he discovered "Derek" had again walked right back into the trap. Biff did think that he had a good story as his explanation for returning. It was a story he felt sure would prevent Dietz from harming him.

Once again, Biff's plan was going to backfire.

CHAPTER XIII

Turnabout

Biff walked along the lonely, winding road, alert, ears tuned for any sound, and admitting frankly to himself that his nerves were on edge. It was nearly eleven o'clock by the time he reached the gate. The only light at the house was the single, bare bulb illuminating the front porch.

Was Dietz back? Had they all gone to bed? Biff didn't think so. He slipped through the gate. Keeping in the shadows as much as possible, he went up to the house. He couldn't hear a sound from within. He moved around to the rear, peeking through every window he passed. Nothing stirred. The silence was creepy. Biff felt he would welcome even Dietz. Now that he had decided on this course, he wanted to get started. He wanted to see Dietz's reaction when "Derek" delivered himself into the hands of his enemy.

The sound of a car came to Biff's ears from a distance. He ran swiftly back to the gateway, and scurried into the hiding place in which he had concealed himself before.

Just in time, too. The black limousine came up the road, passed through the gate, and drew up in front of the porch. Dietz got out. Crunch got out. Biff could see Dietz speak to Crunch. The big Indian bowed his head and walked off in the direction of the small house where Biff had first seen him.

“Good,” Biff said half aloud. “At least, I won’t have to worry about Crunch being present when I go up there.”

He waited a few minutes more. Specks returned from parking the car, joined Dietz, who had waited on the porch, and the two men entered the house. The porch light went off. Lights inside the house came on.

“Well, it’s now or never. This is it, Biff Brewster. Get hold of yourself and start moving.”

Biff crossed the yard again and mounted the steps leading to the porch. His heart was pounding. He swallowed, but the lump in his throat stayed where it was. Biff’s knuckles rapped on the door. He stepped back. He heard footsteps approaching. The door opened. It was Specks.

Specks’ mouth dropped open in amazement. His face went pale. The red blotches on his cheeks became even redder against the whiteness of his skin.

“Who is it, Specks?” Biff heard Dietz call.

Specks didn’t answer. He was speechless.

“Who’s there?” Dietz called again. “What is it? Specks!” he snapped. “What’s happened to you?”

Biff stepped forward.

“May I come in?”

As he stepped inside the house, Specks took a step backward. He must have thought he was seeing a ghost. Just then Dietz came into the hallway. He took one look at Biff, and the glass he was holding in one

hand dropped to the floor.

“Zook! Derek Zook!”

Dietz was as astonished as Specks. But being quicker-witted than his partner, Dietz got over his amazement faster.

“It’s Zook. Grab him, Specks!”

“That won’t be necessary, Mr. Dietz,” Biff said boldly. “I have come here on my own.”

Still not believing what he saw or heard, Dietz came up to Biff. He placed a hand on Biff’s arm, as though trying to assure himself that the boy was real.

Biff brushed past the two men and walked down the hallway to a door which led into a living room. He walked in, picked out a comfortable chair, and sat down in it as calmly as if he were in his own home in Indianapolis.

Still somewhat dazed, Dietz entered the room and stared at Biff. Specks stood in the doorway, shaking his head.

Dietz recovered his poise.

“What are you doing here? Why have you come back?” he demanded.

“This is going to be fun,” Biff thought. “Didn’t know I was going to knock them for this much of a loop.” Aloud, he said:

“I haven’t been away.”

“You mean—you mean all the time we were in Willemstad looking for you, you were right here!”

“Most of the time,” Biff answered truthfully.

“Go get Crunch,” Dietz ordered Specks. A gleam had come into his eyes. He was getting ready to take over.

“Now you tell me why you have come back here,” Dietz said to Biff,

and walked over to the chair where Biff was sitting.

“I want information,” Biff said. “I want to know where my father is.”

“Oh, you do. And you think I’ll tell you just for the asking.” Dietz’s laugh was more of a sneer.

“We may be able to make a bargain,” Biff said.

Dietz leaned forward. A hungry look spread over his face.

“You mean if I tell you where your father is—” he began.

“I might persuade him to cut you in on the pearl fishery. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

Dietz didn’t reply. He walked across the room and stood by a long, low table. His hand went to his head. He rubbed his scalp. His long silence worried Biff. It was obvious that some scheme was forming in Dietz’s mind. He came back to Biff.

“I’ll tell you where your father is if you’ll tell me the exact location of the pearl fishery.” Dietz poked his crafty face close to Biff’s.

Biff could hardly suppress a smile. He knew that neither one of them could give the other the information asked for. Biff didn’t know where the pearl fishery was. He also knew that Dietz didn’t know where Brom Zook was. This was going to be a cat-and-mouse game. Biff just hoped it could be played long enough for his uncle and Derek to get things firmed up in Martinique.

“Can you take me to my father?”

“Not until you give me the information I want,” Dietz replied.

“Is he here in Curaçao, or in Martinique?” Biff asked this question to stall for more time. He knew Dietz couldn’t give him an honest answer.

Before Dietz could reply, Specks returned. The giant Crunch was behind him.

"Now, young man, you'll find out just what a fool you were not to stay away from here once you had made your escape," Dietz declared.

The tide was running against Biff. There was a look of triumph on Dietz's evil face.

"I came here with a fair proposition for you," Biff said.

"Fair? Never heard the word," Dietz replied, his voice scornful. "You've walked and talked yourself right into being my prisoner again. And this time, Crunch will make sure you don't escape."

Biff looked at the powerful Crunch. There was a big, silly smile on his face. He clenched and unclenched his hands, as if he could hardly wait to get Biff in his grip.

"You young fool," Dietz said. "Don't you know you and Keene can't get the working permit to that fishery unless you sign for it?"

"But neither can you."

"Ha! That's what you think. It so happens, you stupid boy, that I have a friend in the Fisheries Commission on Martinique. You and Keene may have stopped me once. But you won't again. Crunch, take him away. And this time, if you let him escape—" Dietz drew the edge of his hand across his throat "—that's what you'll get."

Crunch crossed to Biff's chair. He seized Biff by one arm and lifted him out of the chair as if he weighed no more than a rag doll.

Biff knew it would be foolish to resist. His plan had backfired.

Why, he thought, with a sinking feeling, hadn't he or Uncle Charlie realized that Dietz, thinking Biff to be Derek, would hold him, and make for Martinique as fast as he could? Biff realized now that, far from delaying Dietz's trip to Martinique, he had afforded him the chance to go there sooner.

He knew this all too well as Crunch forced him down the hallway toward the door. He heard Dietz say to Specks:

“We leave for Martinique in the morning.”

A Talk with Crunch

Although Biff's strategy had backfired, it did give his uncle a slight jump on Dietz.

Just after daybreak, Charlie Keene and Derek were at the waterport where Keene kept his seaplane. He warmed up the plane's twin engines. He pointed the plane's nose into the wind, and the aircraft streaked across mirror-flat water. The seal between plane's hull and the sea was broken, and the plane was airborne.

Charlie Keene put the plane on a course direct for Martinique, a little over five hundred miles away. If all went well, they would land at Fort-de-France in under three hours. That would get them there in time for the opening of the office of the Fisheries Commission.

Dietz wouldn't be able to leave until the commercial flight at 9 A.M. He wouldn't get to Martinique until noon.

"I hope Biff's all right," Derek said to Biff's uncle. The plane was high over the sparkling waters of the Caribbean Sea. The island of Curaçao was only a small dot in the sea behind them. Directly below, they saw a slender, cigar-shaped cruise ship heading for the port Charlie Keene and Derek had just left.

"Biff's been in plenty of tough spots, Derek. I've been in some of them with him. I'd never have let him take that chance if I didn't think he could handle it. Still—I won't have any peace of mind until we're all together again."

"That will be good, Mr. Keene. It seems I only see Biff for a few minutes, then we're separated again. I like Biff. I want to know him better."

Uncle Charlie smiled. It pleased him that his nephew and Derek had become friends.

"You will, Derek. And you're right. Biff's as fine a fellow as you'll ever know. You two ought to have a great time, skin diving for pearls. You ever do any skin diving?"

"Some. In the Mediterranean. I went there with my grandparents last summer. Biff's done a lot of skin diving, I'll wager."

"He sure has, Derek. In Hawaii and off the coast of Southern California. His family has a cottage on a lake out there. The whole family goes in for the sport."

A little after eight-thirty, the island of Martinique came into view.

"Another ten minutes and we'll be there," Charlie said. He put the plane into a long, gentle descent. They came in low over Fort-de-France, circled the city, then came back to set down in the harbor.

At about the same time Charles Keene was setting the seaplane down, Crunch was setting Biff's breakfast before him. While Crunch had been at the big house to pick up the food, Biff had inspected his prison carefully. It didn't take him long to determine that escape was out of the question. The iron bars on the windows were three-quarters of an inch thick and deeply imbedded in the concrete. Biff tested each bar, just in case there might be a loose one.

"Not a chance," Biff thought. "I'm here until someone comes for me. Unless—unless I can outfox Crunch again."

Now, Biff and Crunch ate their breakfasts in silence. When they had finished, Biff tried to draw the giant out. His first questions were met with grunted replies.

"You know, Crunch," Biff tried again, "I've been all over the world, and I don't think I've ever seen a man as big and strong as you are."

A pleased smile came over the Indian's face. He still didn't say anything.

"In China, I knew a man called Muscles. I thought he was strong. But you could handle him easily."

The pleased smile on Crunch's simple face grew broader.

"I suppose your boss Dietz has already gone?" Biff shot the question in while Crunch was still enjoying the flattery.

Crunch froze. The pleased expression left his face.

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to. I know he's gone. I heard the car leave early this morning."

"You hear car leave, you know boss gone. Why you ask?" Crunch demanded.

"Just something to talk about, Crunch," Biff said casually. "We're going to get mighty tired of one another just sitting here in silence."

The Indian didn't reply.

"You know, Crunch, I think I could get to like you. You don't look like a bad man to me."

"Crunch good man," the Indian said.

"Then why do you work for Dietz?" Biff asked.

No reply.

"Oh, you don't have to tell me. But I know we could be friends. I'm not going to try to get away from you."

"You do one time. Make fool out of Crunch. Boss Dietz very mad at Crunch."

"You're not going to believe this, Crunch, but I never did escape from you. Honestly."

"Now you make joke with Crunch. You get away. Last night. Before sky get dark."

"How could I, Crunch?" Biff asked. "Have you looked around the windows? The bars are still all in them, aren't they?"

“Crunch look good. Bars all there. You get out by magic.”

Biff laughed. “Well, I must admit, I did use a trick.”

“See. Crunch know. You get out by magic.”

“If I got out by magic once, why couldn’t I do it again? Like right now.”

Biff stood up. Crunch leaped to his feet and grabbed Biff by the arm.

“You go, Crunch go with you,” he declared.

“That’s too much of a trick for me,” Biff said, laughing. “Even if you do think I’m magic.”

Crunch released his grasp. Biff sat down, rubbing his arm where the giant had grabbed it.

“Do you like Dietz, Crunch? Do you like working for him?”

Crunch frowned. He looked like a big, bad boy forced to do something he didn’t want to do.

“I’d say you don’t,” Biff went on. “I can’t believe a man like you would work for a bad man like Dietz if you didn’t have to.”

“Have to,” Crunch said. His hand flew to his mouth, as if he were trying to force back the words he had just spoken.

“I thought so, Crunch,” Biff said. He was winning this man over. Biff felt a definite sympathy for Crunch. “Why do you work for him?”

Crunch was silent for a minute. When he finally spoke, there was a surprising bitterness in his voice.

“Crunch have brother. Little brother. He do bad thing one time. Have to leave Curaçao. He go to Martinique. Lots of Carib Indians still in Martinique.”

Crunch stopped speaking. This was the longest statement he had made. It seemed to pain him to talk so much.

“Go on, Crunch,” Biff said gently.

“In Martinique, brother work for boss Dietz. He tell boss Dietz what he do. He hope to come back to Curaçao. Boss Dietz say he help.” Crunch paused again.

“And he didn’t?”

“No. He come to Crunch. Say if Crunch don’t work for him, do everything he say, he tell police. If police catch little brother, him go way to jailhouse for long time.”

“So that’s why you work for Dietz?”

Crunch nodded his head.

“Crunch go back to house now. You stay here. No use magic to get out of jail.”

“I promise, Crunch,” Biff said. “I promise not to use magic.”

Biff felt so sorry for the giant at that moment, he wouldn’t have walked out on him had Crunch left the door wide open.

Crunch didn’t, however. He made sure the door was locked.

In Martinique, Charlie Keene and Derek were coming out of the Fisheries Commissioner’s office. They had the papers. The working permit had been signed, and it was now tucked in Derek’s inside coat pocket.

“I never heard so many questions, Mr. Keene,” Derek said. “That man asked the same ones over and over again.”

“He was stalling, Derek. He didn’t want to give us that permit,” Biff’s uncle said.

“Why?”

“I don’t trust that clerk. I have a feeling he may be dealing with Dietz. Just how, I haven’t figured out yet. But I’ll bet Dietz promised to cut

him in if he could hold up giving us the papers.”

“Well, he did give them to us,” Derek remarked.

“After a struggle. Come on, Derek, let’s get back to the plane and hop over to La Trinité.”

“That’s where my father had his headquarters, isn’t it?”

“Yes. That’s where I last saw him, and that was the postmark on the letters and the packaged pearls he sent us.”

Charlie and Derek took a battered taxi driven by a barefoot native back to the airport. The water basin where Charlie’s plane was tied up to a long ramp adjoined the airport.

They got there just about noon. They saw a commercial plane come in for a landing.

“That’s the plane from Curaçao, Derek.”

They watched the plane taxi in. They had to pass right by it on the way to the seaplane. The door of the plane opened as they went by. Passengers began deplaning. Derek looked back at them. He grabbed Biff’s uncle by the arm. Charles Keene swung around in time to see Dietz and Specks come down the unloading stairs.

“Come on, don’t let them see us.” Keene took Derek by the arm and hustled him away.

“This calls for a change in plans,” Biff’s uncle said. “Something must have gone wrong. I’m really worried about Biff now. I’ll fly you over to La Trinité, then get back to Curaçao. You’d better lie low. Dietz will be heading for La Trinité as soon as he learns we’ve beat him to the punch again.”

“When will you come back?” Derek asked.

“As soon as I can. As soon as I can free Biff. Don’t let Dietz get his hands on you while I’m gone.”

“I won’t,” Derek declared. “I’m going to spend the time, until you and Biff return, looking for my father.”

Almost Away

Charles Keene was winging his way back to Curaçao. Derek Zook was in La Trinité across the Island of Martinique from Fort-de-France. Biff Brewster was still a prisoner in the cellhouse outside Willemstad. Herman Dietz and Specks Cade were at the Fisheries Commission Office in Fort-de-France, giving a cowering clerk a very hard time.

A tall, gaunt man, his body wasted away by a long siege of fever, lay on a narrow cot in a monastery high in the Pitons du Carbet.

The time was approaching when all these people would be drawn closer and closer together, the magnet attracting them being a small but rich pearl fishery in the Baie du Trésor.

When Charlie dropped Derek off at La Trinité, he had had one suggestion as to where the Dutch lad could best start his search for his father.

“The post office, Derek,” Charles Keene had said. “That would be your best bet. Your letter and mine both bore the La Trinité postmark. See what you can find out there.”

Derek was now following Charles Keene’s advice.

“A tall man, you say. Very fair with light-brown hair?” the postal clerk asked.

“Yes. My father,” Derek said. “I know he was here about three months ago, perhaps a little longer than that.”

The postal clerk thought for a moment. “There was such a man as you describe. I recall him. His appearance was in such contrast to the rest of us here in Trinité. But I have not seen him for months.”

“I know. I haven’t heard from him either. I am desperately anxious for

any hint as to where he might have gone.”

“Zook. That was his name, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, yes,” Derek replied eagerly.

“Again, the name I remember because it is so different from the names of the people who live here. Yes, many of us knew about this man. He was searching the waters of our treasure bay.”

“That was my father, all right.”

“It was rumored that he searched for pearls,” the clerk went on. “The people of this village had great interest in his activities.”

“Would there be any one person who might have known him well?”

“When he was not out searching the ocean floor, he stayed at a small *pension* not far from here. You could inquire there.”

“Where is the place?”

“It is called by the name of Pension Sans Souci. You will have no trouble in finding it. It is on this very street. When you go out, turn to your right. A walk of two blocks will bring you there.”

“*Merci*. Thank you very much,” Derek said.

His hopes were high as he walked down the street under a blazing tropical sun. But these high hopes were short lived. At the Sans Souci, the boardinghouse whose English name would be “Without Care,” Derek learned little more.

“I am so sorry, young man, that I cannot give you news of your father,” the manager of the small boardinghouse told Derek. “We were very fond of him.”

“He left no word as to where he was going?”

“No. We didn’t even know he had left us. One morning, quite early, he came to our modest establishment. I thought he seemed quite

distraught. He was not his usual cheerful self. He had hardly a word with me. And it was his custom to chat with others here. He went to his room. To rest, I supposed. I went to awaken him for the noon meal. His room was empty.”

“And that is all you can tell me?”

“As much as I regret it, that is all I know. There have been rumors—”

“What? What are they?” Derek wanted any information that might be a clue to his father’s whereabouts.

“It was reported, shortly after your father left us, that such a man of his appearance had been seen in the foothills of the Carbet Mountains. But these tales were discounted. It would be highly unlikely that your father would explore the mountains. His interest was in the ocean and what might be on the bottom of the sea. I am sorry, young man.”

Derek left the Sans Souci very disheartened. If the rumors were true, why would his father have gone into the interior of the island? And if he had gone there, why had he stayed so long?

“I’m going to find out,” Derek said to himself determinedly. “Every chance I get, I’ll go into those foothills and peaks. I’ll find him.”

* * * * *

In Fort-de-France, Herman Dietz could hardly contain his anger. Specks had never seen the boss so furious.

“But it could not have been,” Dietz said angrily. He and Specks were in the Fisheries Commission Office. The clerk they were talking to cringed at Dietz’s words.

“You’re a fool!” Dietz raged. “I tell you Derek Zook *couldn’t* have signed for those papers. Derek Zook is in Curaçao. Right this minute.”

The clerk could only shake his head.

“You remember what I promised you?” Dietz continued. “I told you you would share in the proceeds of the pearl fishery. There was little

you had to do. Only hold up those rights until I could act.”

“I tried, Mr. Dietz. I delayed as long as I could. Keene and the boy were here over two hours. I expected you here to lodge a protest. But when you failed to appear, I had to issue the permit.”

“Well, I’m going to lodge a protest now. With the Commissioner himself. I’ll tell him how badly you botched your job! How you permitted an impostor to fool you.”

Dietz stormed out of the office, followed by Specks, and made for the office of the Commissioner.

* * * * *

“Another day is coming to an end, Crunch,” Biff said to the giant Carib. “And I’m getting hungry. How about my moving that alarm clock up half an hour?”

“Crunch hungry, too. Here.” Crunch handed Biff the alarm clock. Biff moved the alarm, setting it back from six-thirty to six.

“There, we’ll have dinner half an hour earlier.”

During the long day, Biff had made great progress in gaining Crunch’s confidence and friendship. He had drawn the simple-minded giant out about his brother. The crime the brother had committed was a petty crime, a small theft. Biff felt almost certain that the police had long since wiped the charge from the books. Even if they hadn’t, the theft had taken place so long ago that Biff thought the statute of limitations would have erased the charge.

Dietz, of course, had blown up the seriousness of the theft into a major crime. He had put a real fear into Crunch and his brother.

The brother had paid a high price for his deed. Forced to hide out on Martinique, he had been separated from his wife and children for years.

“Little brother very much want to come back to Curaçao. Want to see family.”

“Too bad, Crunch,” Biff sympathized. “I can imagine how he feels. Does he write? How do you hear from him.”

“No write letters. Can’t write. Friends tell about him. Friends who come to Curaçao from island.”

“From Martinique?”

“That’s right. From Martinique Island many, many boat days away.”

“You know, Crunch, I wouldn’t be surprised if I could help your brother come back to Curaçao. He might have to go to jail. But only for a short time. I don’t know about that. If he did commit that crime, he’d have to pay for it. But wouldn’t it be better if he faced the charge? His sentence would be light. At the end, he would be free.”

Crunch leaned forward to Biff. Big and powerful as the man was, he had the feelings of a small child. Biff could see tears in his eyes.

“You do that, Crunch your friend!”

“I can’t promise, Crunch. But I do know that Dietz has been using you. Misusing is a better word.”

Biff wasn’t sure Crunch understood. He couldn’t be sure. But he felt that he was getting to the giant Indian. At first, it had been Biff’s plan to gain Crunch’s confidence, outwit him, and escape. He still wanted to escape, but by now, he felt a great sympathy for the simple, friendly man. He really wanted to help him.

The alarm bell went off. Crunch stood up.

“No magic. You still be here when Crunch come back?”

“I’ll be here, Crunch,” Biff replied.

Crunch went out, still careful to lock the door behind him. There could be no doubt that his liking for Biff was growing, but fear of Dietz still guided the Indian’s actions.

Crunch had been gone about five minutes. Biff stretched out on the

cot and turned on his left side. “Ouch,” he said as the pen clipped to his shirt pocket dug into him. He changed the pen to his hip pocket and settled, face down, relaxed. Suddenly he sat up again, took out the pen, and stared at it thoughtfully....

Minutes later, Biff was startled by a call, a call from a voice that was good news to Biff.

“Biff! Biff! Where are you? Sing out so I can come to you.”

“Here, Uncle Charlie! I’m here! In this house. It’s the one farthest from the big house.”

“I’m on my way, Biff!”

Biff leaped to the door. He stood there, hands grasping the bars, straining his eyes to spot his uncle.

He saw him coming at a run.

“Hi, Uncle Charlie!” Biff called. “I knew you’d be back for me!” He could see the big grin on Charlie’s face as he drew nearer.

Biff’s smile of happiness changed to one of dismay. His uncle was only a few feet away. From behind a clump of bushes, Crunch appeared. He leaped out as Charlie passed. His huge arms wrapped around Keene.

“Look out!” Biff cried. It was too late.

Charles Keene, a powerful man himself, was helpless in the giant Indian’s grasp.

A “Magic” Alarm

Biff watched his uncle struggle to break free of the Indian’s crushing grasp. He saw the tendons in his uncle’s neck grow taut and stand out as Charlie Keene heaved his shoulders with every bit of his strength.

It was as if his uncle were trying to break loose from iron bands.

“Crunch! Crunch,” Biff shouted. “Let him go! Let him go!”

The Indian only shook his head.

Biff strained at the iron bars, furious that he was unable to go to his uncle’s aid.

“I’m your friend, Crunch! So is that man. He’s my uncle. Let him go!”

Crunch ignored Biff. Charlie’s face was turning red. The powerful Crunch was actually trying to crush his smaller opponent. Biff knew he had to do something and do it fast. But what?

Biff realized that if he were to keep his uncle from having some ribs cracked, it would have to be brains against brawn. Maybe Biff could play on the Indian’s superstition.

“Crunch!” he shouted again. “If you don’t let him go, I’ll make more magic—bad magic.”

At first the words had no effect on Crunch. But after a few moments, Biff’s threat seemed to sink in. Crunch released some of his pressure, but still held Charlie Keene firmly.

“If you don’t let him go, I’ll make the magic that takes me out of this house,” Biff threatened.

Crunch was listening now.

“I’ll disappear, Crunch. Watch.”

Biff moved away from the doorway. He went to the window to the right of the door. He stayed below the opening so Crunch couldn’t see him.

“Where am I, Crunch?” Biff called out. “You think I’m at this window, don’t you? You hear my voice at this window. But I’m not here. Only my voice is. My body is at the other window.”

Biff leaped across the small room at his last word and sprang into view at the window to the left of the door. As he looked out, Crunch was still watching the other window.

Biff banged the bars of the window, being careful not to speak. Crunch swung his head around. The sight of Biff startled him. Biff ducked down. He cupped his hands and held them to his mouth. Turning his head in the direction of the other window, he called in a low voice:

“But my voice is still where you first heard it!”

Biff raised his head slowly. The simple trick was working. Crunch had turned to the other window.

“Now my voice and body are back together again, Crunch!”

The startled expression on Crunch’s face showed the giant Indian’s confusion. He was becoming frightened.

“If I only had a clincher,” Biff thought. “Something that would really impress Crunch.” Biff’s eyes lit on the alarm clock. An idea popped into his head.



"I'm going to disappear, Crunch," he called. "But I'll return. And if I return, you will have to release that man."

Biff ducked down. He grabbed the alarm clock and raced into the back room, careful to keep out of sight. Biff was counting on the Indian's actually believing he had disappeared to get enough time to put his new idea into effect.

Quickly Biff reset the alarm. He set it to go off in three minutes. He put the alarm lever at "ON." Then he went to a side window and tossed the alarm clock out. He saw it land in the soft sand, and prayed the fall hadn't damaged the clock.

Biff hurried back to the front room. He got down on his hands and knees and crawled to the door. It was a huge door. The bottom half was of heavy, thick timbers. The upper half was open with five-inch-thick iron bars. Slowly Biff raised his head until it was just above the solid half of the door. From the outside his head looked as if it were detached from his body.

"Crunch," Biff said the name softly. Crunch, fright showing in his eyes, looked from one window to the other.

"Crunch," Biff called softly again. "I'm down here now. My head is."

Crunch looked at the door. His eyes widened, showing white. Crunch

was becoming terrified.

“I give you a minute, Crunch. Just one minute. Then, if you don’t release my uncle, evil spirits will surround you and this house. They will ring bells....”

“I hope, I hope,” Biff said to himself. Crunch still held on to Charles Keene. But his grip was nowhere near as strong as it had been.

Biff waited. In his anxiety, his palms were sweating.

“Crunch,” Biff said again. “I’ve warned you. Let him go.”

At these words, the alarm clock went off.

“EEEEiiiiipe!” Crunch yelled. He let go of Charlie, turned, and fled.

Charlie Keene shook himself. He pressed his ribs with his hands.

“No bones broken. But wow! Is that guy ever strong! He could have crushed me, Biff. That was sure quick thinking on your part.”

Charlie walked over to the door. “If I’d known how powerful that man is,” he added, “I never would have let you get yourself captured.”

Biff smiled. “Crunch isn’t as bad as he seems, Uncle Charlie. He’s really a very gentle man.”

“Gentle! You’ve never been given a Crunch bear hug!”

“I mean he’s a simple soul. He’s superstitious. He really thinks I can magic myself out of this place. He thinks that’s how Derek got out the first time. He doesn’t know, of course, that it was I, not Derek, he saw outside.”

“And speaking of getting outside, just how are we going to get you out of this place?” Uncle Charlie demanded.

“Crunch has the key,” Biff said.

“And you’ve scared him so badly he’ll never come back. Let me take a look at this lock.”

Charlie examined the lock carefully.

"It's no good, Biff. It's too strong to force. I can't open this lock. You're just going to have to magic your way out."

"Or get Crunch to come back and let me out."

"Think you can, Biff? I doubt it."

"I can try," Biff replied. "Crunch and I were getting to be good friends. He's not a bad guy. Dietz has a hold on him and forces him to do this dirty work. I'm going to call him.... Crunch!" Biff sang out.

No answer.

"Crunch! Can you hear me? If you can, listen carefully. I've sent the evil spirits away. They won't harm you. They have stopped their noises." The alarm clock had run down.

"I'm still locked in, Crunch. I promised you I wouldn't use my magic to get out. I've kept my promise. Come back and see."

"If this works, Biff," Uncle Charlie said in a low voice, "then you've really got that giant under your thumb."

Biff and his uncle waited. No sign of Crunch. No sound.

"It'll be night soon, Biff. He'll never come back in the dark."

"I know that. I'm going to try again. Crunch! Night is coming on. My magic works better in the dark. If you don't come back before it's dark, then I'll have to break my promise and magic my way out."

"That ought to do it if anything will, Biff," Charlie said.

They waited. Both looked toward the east. Already the horizon was beginning to darken. Minutes passed. It would be totally dark in another minute.

"Crunch come back." The deep voice came from the shadows.

Charlie Keene swung around. Ten feet away, at the edge of the sand

apron extending from the undergrowth to the house, stood Crunch.

“Let me do the talking, Uncle Charlie,” Biff said in a low voice.

“You bet I will, Biff. You know how to handle that giant.”

“Come here, Crunch,” Biff said gently.

The Indian approached cautiously. His head pivoted from one direction to the other. Crunch was looking for the evil spirits.

“I have kept my promise, Crunch. I have not made the magic that would take me out of here.”

Crunch didn’t speak.

“I want you to let this man in here with me. I want to show you that we are your friends.”

Crunch was at the door. His hand pulled out the large key to the lock.

“Uncle Charlie, Crunch is going to let you come in with me. Then he will go back to the house for food for all of us—”

“But, Biff,” Charlie protested, “if I get locked in there with you—”

“It will be all right, Uncle Charlie. Crunch is our friend. We are his friends. Please, let me handle this my way.”

Charlie Keene shrugged his shoulders. “Okay, Biff.”

Crunch turned the key in the lock. He swung the door open. Charlie Keene entered, and Crunch closed and locked the door. Without another word, he disappeared in the darkness on the way to the big house.

“Biff, if I didn’t know you so well, I’d say you’d gone a little soft in the head.” Charlie Keene shook his own head. “Now we’re both locked in.”

Biff was lighting a candle. In the glow of its light, Uncle Charlie could see a big smile spread over his nephew’s face.

“You think so, Uncle Charlie? Watch this!”

Biff went to the door. He knelt down, holding the candle’s flame at the keyhole. He placed his thumb and forefinger carefully at the keyhole opening and grasped a small wire.

“This ought to work. I inserted this piece of wire in the lock’s catch. If it wasn’t dislodged when Crunch just now opened the door, then I should be able to spring the catch with this wire. Hold your breath, Uncle Charlie. Here goes.”

Biff tugged smoothly but firmly on the wire. There was a sharp “click.” The catch was sprung. Biff pushed the door open.

“But where did you dig up a piece of wire?” Uncle Charlie asked. “Maybe Crunch is right and you do have a touch of that old black magic.”

Biff chuckled. “Not black, Unc, blue magic.” Biff held out the separate parts of a blue plastic ballpoint pen. “I remembered I had this in my pocket. I removed the steel spring from it, straightened it the best I could, and used it.”

“Well, I’ll be—” Charlie Keene said.

“Don’t you remember, Uncle Charlie? You taught me that trick.”

Charlie Keene chuckled. “I take it all back, Biff. There’s nothing soft about that head of yours. Now, let’s get out of here! But fast!”

“Why, Uncle Charlie? We can get out any time we want to. Why don’t we both spend the night here? I’d like to gain Crunch’s confidence completely. He could be a big help to us on Martinique. It’s good to have a friend in the enemy’s camp.”

“Yes, Biff. I think you’ve really got something going. We couldn’t get back to Martinique tonight, anyway.”

Biff opened the door and went out.

“Where are you going?” his uncle called softly.

“Back in a minute.” Biff was back in less.

“Had to get this,” he said with a grin. He held up the alarm clock.

“Heap big magic, Uncle Charlie.”

Biff left the door open. He and his uncle sat down on the cot.

“When Crunch comes back and sees the door open,” Biff laughed,

“he’ll really think I can out-magic a voodoo medicine man.”

Biff and his uncle heard Crunch approaching.

“I want to see this,” Charlie said. He walked over to the window. Biff was right beside him. Crunch stood in the sand, staring at the open door. It took several moments for the Indian to get over his amazement. He put down the food he was carrying and moved about in a shuffle, trying to make up his mind what he should do next.

The giant turned suddenly and started off at a lope, intending to search the grounds for Biff and his uncle.

“We’re still here, Crunch,” Biff called out. “We haven’t escaped.”

Crunch stopped. He came back to the cellhouse slowly. Standing in the doorway, his jaw sagged open. Disbelief showed in his eyes.

“No go away? No escape?” He was completely bewildered.

“No, Crunch. I told you we wouldn’t.”

“How you get door open?”

Biff only smiled in reply, looking very wise and mysterious.

“Magic! You make more magic!”

When Biff still didn’t say anything, Crunch went back outside and got the food. When he came in, he placed the food on the table, then carefully locked the door. After he had done so, he looked at the key, and a foolish expression came over his face, as if he were asking himself, “Why do I lock the door?”

Crunch still wore a puzzled look on his face as he sat quietly and watched Biff and Uncle Charlie eat the meal he had prepared for

them. It was a fish dish with a delicious but very hot sauce. The sauce burned the eaters' mouths, making the cool, smooth avocado salad that went with it highly welcome.

"That was mighty good, Crunch," Biff said.

"Sure was," Uncle Charlie chimed in. He took a sip of lime drink and spoke to Biff. "We'd better turn in early. We'll want to get an early start for Martinique. Going to take Crunch with us?"

"How about it, Crunch?" Biff asked. "Would you like to go to Martinique? You could see your brother. Maybe my uncle and I could help him."

"Crunch have to stay here. Wait for boss Dietz."

"Mr. Dietz is in Martinique, Crunch. He might need you over there," Biff said.

It was going to take some time for Crunch to figure this one out. He was still afraid of Dietz.

"Think it over, Crunch, and tell us in the morning," Biff said.

When dawn broke, and Uncle Charlie shook his sleep-drugged nephew into wakefulness, both knew that they had won Crunch completely over. He had already gone to the main house for food. And he had left the door wide open!

"Made up your mind yet, Crunch?" Biff asked the Carib Indian after they had finished breakfast. "You coming with us?"

Crunch was silent, still torn between his fear of Dietz and his admiration for Biff.

"We're going now," Biff told him.

Biff and his uncle went to the door. The Indian made no move to prevent their leaving.

"Good-by, Crunch," Biff called.

Crunch stood in the doorway and watched them leave. At the arched gateway, Biff and his uncle climbed into the car. Charlie started it up. They were just beginning to roll when they heard a shout. Looking back, Biff saw Crunch coming on the run.

“Wait! Wait! Crunch come with you.”

A completely new life was opening up for Crunch. He had never been off the island of Curaçao. He had never been in an aircraft. For the first half of the flight to Martinique, he sat rigidly in his seat, hands grasping the seat arms as if he were holding the plane in the air.

“We’ll stop at Fort-de-France first, Biff,” Uncle Charlie said. “Got to pick up some diving equipment and other supplies. Then we’ll hop on over to La Trinité.”

Flying low over the waters of the Caribbean, as his uncle came in for a landing in the harbor, Biff spotted a large net bobbing in a sweeping arc between two native boats. The fishermen doffed their broad straw hats and waved at the plane. Directly over the seine, Biff could see thousands of fish leaping, swirling, their silver sides glittering in the sunlight.

Walking through the teeming streets of the city was an experience in itself. Fort-de-France with its 66,000 residents is crowded between two rivers gallantly named Rivière Madame and Rivière Monsieur. To Biff, it seemed as if every resident of the town swarmed in the narrow street down which the three walked that morning.

“Look at that!” Biff said in amazement.

A small native woman walked briskly among the crowd. A sixty-pound basket of fruit and vegetables was balanced on her head.

“Biff, these people are small, but they’re powerful. And they have a magnificent sense of balance,” Uncle Charlie said.

In the basket which the woman wore like a headpiece were bright red tomatoes, a green pebble-skinned breadfruit, and some fat pineapples. Under one arm she carried a full stalk of bananas.

The capital of Martinique was a blaze of color, from the women's costumes to the buildings and the flowers growing riotously in every garden and patio. Beautiful bougainvillea, brilliantly colored from rich, deep purple and red to pale lavender and violet, spilled over balconies like cascading waterfalls.

Uncle Charlie led Biff and Crunch to a small hardware store. There was hardly an inch of open space in the store. A heavy bathtub hung over the entrance. Garden hose, bicycles, pots, pans, fishing and skin-diving equipment crowded shelves and hung from rafters.

"How can anyone find anything in here?" Biff asked.

"A mystery to me, too, Biff," Uncle Charlie laughed. "But the clerks can put their hands on any item you ask for in a second. They're really out to serve you."

Biff was given an example of this as his uncle made his purchases. In no time at all, Biff and Crunch were laden with marking buoys, two Scubas—self-contained, underwater-breathing apparatus—and Uncle Charlie brought up the rear with a gay red-and-white nylon tent.

"This is all we need here," he said. "We'll get the rest of the stuff we need—pots and pans and so on—in Trinité."

Making their way back to the aircraft, Biff envied the natives their ability to carry tremendous loads with no apparent effort.

The hop across the island to La Trinité was a short one. The plane was secured to a mooring and gear unloaded.

"Well, Crunch, what are you going to do?" Uncle Charlie asked.

"Find my little brother first," Crunch replied.

"And what about Dietz?" Biff asked.

"Maybe find him, too. Where Crunch find you?"

"We're going to make our headquarters here just down the street. At the Sans Souci. We'll show you," Charlie Keene said, "and if you want

to find us, or get in touch, ask there.”

“What about Derek?” Biff asked. “We’ve got to locate him.”

“Don’t worry, Biff. In a town this size everybody knows everything that’s going on. I’ll bet you right now the grapevine has spread word of our arrival. If Derek is around, he’ll be looking us up within an hour.”

Charles Keene was right. He and Biff checked into the Sans Souci. Crunch went off.

“A little more shopping, Biff, and we’re ready to take off as soon as Derek locates us, or vice versa,” Biff’s uncle said.

Derek caught up with Biff and Uncle Charlie in midafternoon. The Dutch boy was delighted to rejoin his friends.

“This is really fine!” he exclaimed. “So good, Biff, to be back with you and your uncle.”

“That goes double for me, Derek. Any news of your father?”

Derek’s face fell. “No. I’ve heard some rumors about him, but so far, I’ve learned nothing definite as to where he might be. The island grapevine of news seems to break down just as I think I have a real clue.”

“Too bad, Derek,” Charlie said. “But don’t give up hope. We’re all together now. Biff and I want to help you search for your father. It’s important to me to find him, too. After all, I’m working for him.”

“Are you working for me now, too?” Derek asked with a mischievous smile.

“Sure thing, Derek,” Uncle Charlie agreed. “When your father’s not here, you’re the boss.”

“We’ll work well together. How about it, Biff?”

Biff grinned. “Couldn’t find a better combination.”

“And I don’t think we have to worry too much about Dietz now,” Charles Keene added.

That’s where Uncle Charlie was wrong.

CHAPTER XVIII

All Set To Dive

It was nearly five o'clock when Biff, Derek, and Charlie Keene reached the dock in the harbor of the Baie du Trésor. They rode a truck five miles out of La Trinité. The truck was piled high with gear necessary to their search.

A thirty-foot cabin cruiser was waiting for them. Keene had chartered it as his first step after arriving in La Trinité. Slung on davits on the cruiser's stern was a fourteen-foot dory with an outboard motor. This was the boat from which they would do the pearl diving.

With all gear stowed, Uncle Charlie started the cruiser's engine and backed away. On the dock, natives waved, calling, "*Bonne chance! Bonne chance!* Good luck! Good luck!"

"Take the wheel, Biff," his uncle ordered. "Head straight out while I confer with the owner."

"The owner?" Biff and Derek glanced around the cruiser, then looked curiously at Uncle Charlie.

"That's you, Derek." Biff's uncle grinned. "Since you're the boss, you're the owner. I'm the skipper, and Biff is the crew. And I'm sure you want a tightly run ship, so look sharp there, Brewster."

"Aye, aye, skipper," Biff said with a smile.

"Now, Derek, where do we head?" Uncle Charlie asked. "Did your father give you any idea where this pearl fishery is?"

"Only a vague one, Captain." Derek had entered the spirit of the game. "I know that after leaving Treasure Bay Harbor, we head due south—"

"Bring her around, mate," Keene called to Biff. "Set your compass

reading for a southerly run.”

They had left the harbor, and Biff spun the wheel. The cruiser’s bow came around, and Biff held the boat on a due south course.

“He wrote me the spot was about five miles off the main coast of Martinique,” Derek said, “almost directly west of the town of Le François.”

“I know the town.” Keene nodded. “It’s a small fishing village. Ten miles down the coast. Put her at full speed, mate. We’ve got to make a landing before nightfall.”

“There’s a group of small islands off Le François,” Derek continued. “We’ve got to locate the right island. The fishery is a mile off one of them.”

Charlie Keene wiped the sweat off his forehead. “Whew! Not much to go on. There must be a dozen or more islands in that group. Some of them aren’t more than a few acres in area. We’ll make camp on one of the larger ones. Did your father give you any indication of water depth at the fishery?”

“About forty feet.”

“That will help. We won’t do any diving in water over, say, fifty feet. But, Derek, there’s lots and lots of water around here.”

And there was. The coast line and pitons of Martinique were plainly visible, a lush green of wild growth, with fern trees rising as high as maples. West were the endless waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

“We’ll need all the *‘bonne chance’* we can get,” Biff’s uncle commented.

It took about an hour to make the run from Treasure Bay to the islands off Le François. Biff was still at the wheel. His uncle took out a pair of binoculars and swept his gaze over the island group.

“Over there, Biff. That larger one, right between those two smaller ones. Cut your speed. We don’t know how these waters shoal. Derek, go forward. Watch for bottom.”

The cruiser approached the shore slowly.

“Plenty of water,” Derek sang out. Then, “Sand. I see sand bottom,” he called a little later.

“Ease her in, Biff. That small cove. See if you can take her in there. Give us some protection if a *chabasco* hits.”

The cruiser inched forward. The sound of the boat’s keel grating on the sand bottom came to their ears. Biff cut the engine. The cruiser ground to a stop five feet from shore.

“Perfect, Biff. We’ll get a little damp making the next five feet, but I kind of feel like a swim. How about it?” Uncle Charlie suggested.

Biff and Derek stripped off their shirts. Shoes and socks followed. The boys dived over the side. Charlie Keene was right behind them. All three frolicked in the warm waters of the Caribbean for a while.

“All out,” Uncle Charlie ordered presently. “We’ve got work to do. Night’s coming on.”

The cruiser was secured. The dory was lowered and pulled up on the beach. Biff’s uncle remained in the cruiser. Derek took a position waist deep in the water halfway between the boat’s bow and the shore. Charlie passed gear to Derek. Derek handed it on to Biff on shore. The unloading went smoothly and quickly.

Next came the tent. It was set up. Cots were unfolded. A small table and three captain’s chairs were put into place.

“Scoop out a wide, shallow hole and line it with shells.” That was Uncle Charlie’s next order. He kept the boys hopping.

“We’ll put our stove in the shell-lined hole.” Charlie ripped open a carton containing a small two-burner propane stove and set it up.

“String up the lanterns, Biff. It’ll be dark soon.”

The job of setting up camp was completed just as the swift-falling night blanketed the tiny island with darkness.

"Everything look shipshape to you, skipper?" Biff asked his uncle.

Charlie Keene looked around.

"Can't log anything against either of you so far. Good job. Now let's eat."

Biff and Derek peeled some potatoes; Uncle Charlie took a small axe and broke open a canned ham, disdaining to use the key attached to the can.

"Ham and fried potatoes. How does that sound?" Uncle Charlie asked.

"I could eat anything," Biff replied.

"Might as well open up a can of stewed tomatoes, too."

The food, although roughly prepared, seemed delicious to all three. Uncle Charlie was a good cook. The potatoes were crisp and brown. The tomatoes, well, they were just stewed tomatoes. The Danish ham had a delicate flavor unlike any Biff had eaten before.

"It's rather like the hams we have in Holland," Derek said.

"Only two problems in connection with running this camp," Uncle Charlie commented. "Air and water."

"Air? I've never breathed such pure air," Biff said.

"And how much more water do you want than the Caribbean Sea?" Derek chimed in.

"Ever tried drinking it?" Biff's uncle chuckled. "Don't. Fresh water, my lad, is what we need. And there are no springs or wells on these islands."

"Well, we couldn't find any fresher air," Biff said. "You've got to admit that, Uncle Charlie."

"Sure, Biff, sure. But what we want is compressed air. For the Scubas. Those air tanks only carry enough for an hour's diving. I have one

extra tank. We have enough compressed air for about two hours' diving daily. I mean two hours for each of you. I don't think there's any compressed air in Le François. I know there is in Trinité."

"Well, that's not too far," Biff said. "We'll have to go in to Trinité every day. Air and water."

"And fresh food, Biff," Uncle Charlie added.

Derek had been silent during this discussion. Now he spoke:

"Mr. Keene, I have a plan I want to suggest."

"Fire away, Derek."

"Since we have to go in to Trinité every day, I think we ought to do our diving in the morning."

"Okay by me, Derek. Go on."

"Then, around noon, we could go into Trinité. You and Biff could see about supplies. I'd like to spend my afternoons searching for my father. I'm more anxious to find him than to locate the pearl fishery."

"We all are, Derek. And I think your plan's a good one. We could even spend the night at the Sans Souci if we got any leads that would take more than one afternoon to follow."

"That's what I thought. Martinique's not too big an island, but there are many wild, unsettled places on it. I have a feeling that if my father is still alive, he's up in the hills somewhere."

"Now, Derek, there's no reason to believe your father's not alive," Biff said softly.

Derek didn't answer at once. When he did, his voice trembled slightly.

"There's one thing I learned that I didn't tell you." He paused. "There was a storm, a *chabasco*, about the time my father disappeared. I learned that, three days after the *chabasco*, parts of his boat were washed ashore south of here. Near Le Vauclin."

Neither Biff nor his uncle replied. They knew what Derek's fear was. His father might have lost his life in the storm.

"No one knows, though," Derek went on hopefully, "or seems to remember, whether the *chabasco* struck before or after my father was last seen in Trinité."

"You mean when he mailed us our letters?" Uncle Charlie asked.

"Yes," was Derek's one-word reply.

"We can check that, Derek. The postmark will show the date. And the day of the *chabasco* will have been recorded somewhere in Trinité."

"I never thought of that," Derek said. He sounded much more cheerful. Charles Keene had restored his hope.

"Big day ahead of us, boys," Biff's uncle said now. "I'd say it was about time to hit the sack. You with me?"

Biff and Derek were. It seemed impossible to Biff that only that morning, he had been in Curaçao. It also seemed to Biff that he had just heard his uncle say, "Hit the sack," when his uncle's voice came to him again. This time it was, "Hit the deck!"

Morning had come. In an hour, Biff would be at the bottom of the ocean, searching for pearls.

CHAPTER XIX

Pearl Diving

“Before we go out, we’re going to have a dry run with the Scubas,” Biff’s uncle announced.

Biff, Derek, and Uncle Charlie were on the beach where the cruiser was anchored.

“Don’t know how much skin diving you’ve done, Derek—you said some—but Biff can tell you that all diving equipment must be carefully and thoroughly checked out before you go down.”

Derek paid sharp attention.

“Don your Scubas,” Charlie ordered.

The boys quickly slipped on face masks, helmets, water lungs, snorkels. Charlie helped them strap their compressed-air tanks on their backs.

Next the boys put on their weight belts. Into a rubber scabbard on each belt went a wickedly sharp knife. There were sharks in these waters. A depth gauge and watch were strapped on each boy’s left wrist.

Charlie inspected each item of diving equipment carefully. He tugged at straps, examined each piece of gear separately.

“Jettison belts!” he called out suddenly.

With a flip of his hand, Biff hit the catch on his weight belt. It dropped to the sand. Derek was a few seconds longer.

“Seconds can count, Derek, if you get into trouble. Try it again.”

Derek slipped his weight belt back on. Charlie shouted the order.

Derek hit the catch, and his belt dropped.

“That’s better, Derek. Remember, that belt is what holds you down. If you have to come up fast, you’ve got to get rid of that belt fast.”

“But don’t try to come up too fast, Derek,” Biff said. “Especially if you’re down deep.”

“Biff’s right. A good rule to follow is not to rise to the surface any faster than the escaping air bubbles. Your body has to adjust to the variations in water pressure. All right, let’s go out and try it in the water now.”

They climbed in the dory. Uncle Charlie started the outboard, and they moved offshore about fifty feet.

“Sound for depth, Biff.”

Biff dropped a sounding line overboard. He pulled it up, examined the leads marking off every three feet.

“Thirty feet, Uncle Charlie.”

“Okay. Now you know how to clear your masks.”

Both boys nodded their heads.

“I want to hear you tell me.”

Biff began promptly: “If water seeps into your mask, clouding the glass and obscuring your vision, you roll over on your back—”

“Take it from there, Derek,” Charlie cut in.

“Then—then you blow air out through your nose. The air pressure building up in the mask will force the water out around the edges of the mask.”

“Good. You both know the most important safety feature of skin diving. Okay, over you go.”

The boys slipped their swim fins, or flippers, on their feet and lowered

themselves overboard. They sank slowly to the bottom.

At this point, the bottom was smooth, clean white sand. Biff and Derek moved around, using their legs and feet only for propulsion. Biff came up to Derek, circled his thumb and forefinger together, indicating that everything was going smoothly. Derek replied with the “V for Victory” sign. Then they rose to the surface.

When they broke water, Charlie Keene was waiting with another order.

“Down again, and as soon as you touch bottom, jettison your belts.”

Down they went again. Charles Keene was taking no chances on the boys’ safety and ability to skin dive.

Up popped the boys, their wet heads appearing above the water first and looking like strange creatures from the deep. Biff flipped back his face mask.

“Good work, Biff. But you’ve got to go back down and retrieve the weight belts. Here’s a spare. You’d find it tough to get down thirty feet without it.”

Derek climbed aboard the dory while Biff submerged to pick up the belts. He had to make two trips. The weight of three belts would have held him down.

“We might as well start our search off this island first. Good as any.”



At this point, the bottom was smooth, clean white sand

The dory sped out to a point Uncle Charlie estimated to be about a mile away. The anchor was tossed overboard. The sounding line showed the water depth at just over forty-five feet.

"I want you to take this spear along with you, Biff." Uncle Charlie handed his nephew a wicked, lethal-looking weapon. Its tip was needle sharp.

"I doubt you'll run into any bad fish here. But you might. And don't, *do not* use it except in case of extreme danger. If you spear an attacking fish—shark, barracuda or octopus—remember any blood will attract other sharks, and then you'll be in real trouble."

Biff took the spear and examined it.

"Each of you take one of these wire baskets. They're to load the oysters in—if you find any. I'm the puller-up. I've a line on each basket. Now get these signals. I want both of you to give me one sharp tug every ten minutes. That will tell me you're okay. Give two sharp tugs when your basket is filled. I'll pull the basket up, unload it, and lower it again. Now, in case of emergency, a series of sharp tugs will alert me, and I'll be right down. Got it? Okay. Over you go."

The bottom was different this time. Instead of clean, white sand, the bottom was covered with a layer of mud mixed with sand. Biff felt around carefully. Both boys were wearing thick rubber gloves to protect their hands against the sharp, jagged oyster shells.

As Biff was feeling around in the mud, Derek swam over to him. He held a large oyster in front of Biff's mask. Then he plopped it in his basket.

Biff's hand touched a large shell. He dug it out and discarded it. It was a clam. He ran into a nest of oysters. He quickly filled his basket and gave the signal to haul up. Minutes later, the basket came down, swaying in the water at the bottom of the line.

The boys worked slowly, carefully, feeling their way. Every so often, a large fish would swim up to them, coming right to the face masks as if to ask, "What are *you* doing down here?"

Biff kept a sharp check on his watch. He knew his air tank had sufficient air to remain submerged for one hour. It also had a five-minute emergency supply in addition. Biff had no intention of waiting

until he had to use the extra air. After being down fifty-five minutes, he signaled Derek. With his forefinger, he pointed upward. Derek got the idea. The boys began their slow ascent.

Rising, looking up toward the surface, they could see the dory outlined above, a fat, cigar-shaped blob.

Breaking water as they surfaced, each boy grabbed the dory's gunwale. They were both tired. Neither had realized how the water pressure at forty-five feet had sapped their strength. They had been down nearly an hour.

"You don't know what a tough job diving is until you've been down for a good spell," Charlie said. He leaned over the side and helped the boys into the boat.

They took off their diving equipment.

"Had enough for today, boys?" Biff's uncle inquired.

"Oh, no. We'll go down again. After we rest," Biff replied. "All right with you, Derek?"

Derek nodded his head.

"Actually, I don't see much point in going back down," Uncle Charlie said. "We've got ten baskets of oysters. We might as well shuck them and see if we find any pearls. If we don't, then we'll say good-bye to this spot and try another tomorrow."

"Now I like that idea," Biff said and stretched out on the narrow seat that ran around the side of the dory.

His uncle upped anchor, and they headed back to their island camp.

They didn't go into Trinité that day, since they still had the reserve tank of compressed air and enough food for supper. The afternoon was spent at the tedious job of opening oysters. It was slow going. None of the three had the skill of a professional oyster opener.

The job was totally unrewarding.

“Not one pearl.” Biff sighed.

“Not even a single tiny one,” Derek said sadly.

“Now, don’t be downhearted, boys,” Uncle Charlie said, trying to cheer them up. “Can’t expect to hit it the first day.”

“At any rate, we’ve got enough oysters to make a stew. If we had some milk,” Biff said.

“Afraid not, Biff.”

“Yeah. Where are we going to get milk? A seacow, maybe? Wish we’d kept some of them. We could have had an oyster roast.”

“Wrong again, Biff,” Charlie said. “Pearl oysters aren’t edible. These would make you so sick, you wouldn’t be any good for ten days.”

“What a waste!” Biff said, and stretched out on the sand. Every muscle, every bone in his body ached.

All three went to bed that night right after supper.

Biff, having slept heavily, awoke just as dawn broke. He thought he had been awakened by the sound of a boat’s motor. He listened intently. No sound. Biff turned over on his narrow cot, determined to get back to sleep. He was just drifting off when he heard a sound outside the tent, just beyond where his cot touched the inside of the tent wall.

He waited tensely. The sound was only a faint rustle. He saw the side of the tent stretch as if something was crawling underneath it. Biff raised himself on one elbow, ready to sound the alarm.

As he watched, in the faint dawn light, a thick, snake-shaped object slithered up between his cot and the tent’s side.

Enemy Invasion

Biff moved quickly, noiselessly out of his cot. In the increasing daylight, he could see that the strange object slithering over his bed was a huge arm. He went over to his uncle, shook him gently, and when Charlie Keene roused, Biff cautioned silence, pressing a finger to his lips. Biff pointed to his cot.

Charlie Keene saw the arm and was up in a flash. From under his pillow he took a gun. This action startled Biff even more than the mysterious arm. He had no idea that his uncle thought they were in such danger that there was reason for keeping a gun close at hand.

“Stay here,” Uncle Charlie whispered. “I’ll slip outside.”

Biff kept his eyes on the arm. He saw the arm slide over the cot, saw the hand feel it. The hand withdrew quickly, the arm slipped back outside the tent.

“Hold it!” Biff heard his uncle command. This stern order was followed by an amazed “Why, what the—what are you doing here! Biff! Come running!”

Biff leaped out of the tent. In the morning light, he saw his uncle holding a gun on the giant Carib Indian, Crunch.

“Crunch!” Biff’s astonishment turned to delight at seeing his simple, friendly enemy again. “What in the world? Why did you sneak up on us like this!” he exclaimed.

Crunch stepped over to Biff.

“Not know who might be in tent. Want to find my friend, you. Have story of big trouble for you and your friends.”

“What is it, Crunch? Tell me.”

"It is boss Dietz. See Crunch in Trinité. Make Crunch come back and work for him. Last night, Dietz and Specks make camp on next island." Crunch pointed in the direction of an island about half a mile away.

"They leave Crunch to guard camp. But Crunch hear them talk. Tonight, when you all asleep, they come to this island. They going to break up your boats. Crunch wait until they far away, then come over here to give warning. Dietz bad man, very—"

Crunch left his sentence hanging in air. He stared in disbelief at the front of the tent.

He was looking at Derek. His eyes swung from Derek to Biff, then back to Derek and back again from one boy to the other.

"Is more magic!" Crunch howled, terror in his voice. He turned to run.

"Wait, Crunch. Stop." Biff ran over to the Indian and took him by the arm. "It's no more magic. There are really two of us. Me—I'm Biff. That's my name. He's my friend Derek. Come here, Derek."

Derek joined them.

"Touch him, Crunch."

Crunch's hand went out carefully. He touched Derek, then drew his hand back quickly.

"You see, Crunch, he's not a ghost, not a spirit. He's a real person. Just like I am. The only thing, we look very much alike."

Crunch could only shake his head. If his faith in Biff had not been so great, he would have turned and fled.

"All right, Crunch. You believe me? You know you're not just seeing things?"

Crunch nodded his head slowly.

"Okay, Crunch. We want to thank you for giving us this warning."

“No want you to get hurt. Now Crunch go before boss comes back.”

Biff and Derek walked to the edge of the water with Crunch.

“I’ll fix some chow,” Uncle Charlie called.

The boys watched Crunch climb into a small dory and row off. He was facing them as he pulled away, and he was still staring from one boy to the other.

“What do we do now?” Biff asked when he and Derek rejoined Charlie Keene.

“We carry on as if we knew nothing. We’ll explore another place this morning. We’ll go to Trinité this afternoon and replenish our air and food supplies. Tonight, we’ll be ready to give Dietz an unexpected reception.”

The pearl diving that morning was no more productive than it had been the previous day. Noon found the three in the cabin cruiser, heading for Trinité. In town, Derek left Biff and his uncle. He was off on his quest for his father.

The three met again at the prearranged hour of six o’clock and embarked for the return trip to their island camp.

Tension mounted as the evening hours on the island dragged slowly by. At 11 P.M. Charlie Keene arose from his cot. He had ordered Biff and Derek to try and rest.

“Let’s go.”

The boys followed Uncle Charlie down to the cabin cruiser and the dory.

“You both know what you’re to do?” he asked.

“Yes, Mr. Keene,” Derek replied.

“All set, Uncle Charlie,” Biff said.

“Crunch may or may not be with them. I imagine he will be. But I’m sure we don’t have to worry about him now. Okay, Derek, into the cruiser. Biff, you and I will hide behind the dory. Derek, you know when to start and what to do.”

“I do.”

“All right. Take your positions.”

Derek waded out and climbed aboard the cruiser. Biff and his uncle dug into the sand on the beach side of the dory.

Their wait began. It seemed endless. Biff kept glancing at the illuminated dial of his watch. Twelve o’clock. Twelve-thirty.

“Think maybe they found out that Crunch warned us?” Biff asked in a low voice.

“I don’t think so, Biff. How would they?”

Just after one o’clock, Biff and his uncle came alert. From a distance over the water, they heard the sound of a boat engine. It grew louder as the boat drew nearer. Then the sound stopped suddenly.

Biff was puzzled.

“Engine trouble, or have they given up the idea?” he whispered.

“Wait,” his uncle whispered back.

After a few minutes, a new sound came to their ears: the sound of oars rasping against oarlocks, the soft splash of oar blades dipping in and out of the water.

Biff knew now why the engine had been cut—so Dietz could approach without awakening his prey.

The sound of a boat grating gently on sand was heard next. Dietz and Company had made their landing. Biff and his uncle could hear two men conversing in low voices. The voices came nearer. The enemy was standing directly across from where Biff and his uncle lay hidden

behind the dory.

“Walk up toward the tent, Crunch.” It was Dietz’s voice. “Keep them from coming down here if they wake up. Okay, Specks, start drilling.”

That was the plot! Drill holes in the dory. Make it unfloatable. What devilment had they planned for the cruiser? These thoughts flashed through Biff’s mind.

Just as Specks lifted one leg over the gunwale, Charlie Keene, still hidden, let go with his automatic. Eight shots in rapid succession shattered the night silence.

From the cabin cruiser came blast after blast from the boat’s foghorn. *Hurrammppp! ... Hurrammppp! ... Hurrammppp!*

Specks leaped out of the dory.

“They’re laying for us,” Dietz shouted. “Run for the boat!”

Uncle Charlie had slipped in another cartridge clip, and this time his eight rapid-fire shots were aimed just over the heads of the fleeing Dietz and Specks. Derek kept working the foghorn. The noise tore at the night.

Dietz slipped and fell into the water as he jumped for his boat. Specks was frantically shoving it off the beach. Dietz scrambled in. Bullets from the automatic’s third clip were stinging the water around Dietz’s boat like angry wasps.

The frightened pair finally got their engine started, backed off at full throttle, swung around and headed out to sea.

The foghorn continued its angry growling.

“Okay, Derek,” Uncle Charlie called. “Lay off. They’re long gone.”

Derek joined Biff and his uncle, and they watched the light of the fast-disappearing boat. Then, the tension relieved, the three sank down on the sand and howled with laughter.

When Biff was finally able to control his laughing spell, he got up with a start.

“Crunch!” he exclaimed. “What happened to him? I didn’t see him get in the boat.”

“He’s probably halfway across the Atlantic by now,” Charlie answered. “Swimming his lungs out to get away from the evil spirits.”

A search of the small island was started. Crunch was found on the far side, cowering behind a small sand dune.

Once the giant Indian had been calmed down—and Biff had to work hard on him to convince him the evil spirits had fled—Crunch fell to his knees and with outstretched arms, said to Biff:

“Please. Crunch stay with you now, work for you? Do anything you say. Crunch afraid to go back to boss Dietz.”

“Good for you, Crunch. Glad to have you join us.”

The four walked back to the tent.

“I don’t know where you’re going to sleep, Crunch,” Biff said doubtfully.

“Crunch not sleep—stand guard outside tent,” the Indian replied.

Biff turned to his uncle. “What’s Dietz trying to accomplish now?” he asked.

“Harassment, Biff. Stalling. Working out a plan. First of all, he wants to be around when we locate the exact spot of the pearl fishery. Then—well—”

“Then what, Mr. Keene?” Derek asked.

“Nothing to worry about, Derek.”

“You’re holding something back, Mr. Keene. I want to know the truth. I want to know what I’m in for.”

Charlie Keene spoke in a quiet voice. But his words were chilling.

“As far as he knows, your father is gone, Derek—if Dietz can get rid of *you*, then the claim becomes open again.”

A Gay Deception

Although the attack by Dietz and Company had had a comic ending, Biff, his uncle, and Derek realized that the next such attack might have more serious consequences.

The three had settled down on the soft white sand. No one spoke, their minds whirling with thoughts of Dietz. The giant Indian, Crunch, was a few feet removed, squatting on his huge haunches and chewing on a piece of salt grass.

Charlie Keene looked at his nephew.

“Doing some heavy thinking, Biff?” he inquired.

“Trying to, Uncle Charlie. Look ...” he paused, then went on. “I have a feeling that since Dietz failed on this try, he’ll grow even more desperate. I mean, the next time he tries, he probably won’t be so easy to scare off.”

“You’re absolutely right, Biff.”

The boy was silent again. He wanted to be clear in his own mind before he advanced the proposal he had outlined to himself.

“Derek, I don’t want you to be offended by what I’m about to say. It’s just that I want to get my thinking clear. Okay?”

“Nothing you could say, Biff, could make me feel angry with you.”

“Thanks, Derek.” The two boys looked at one another in the starlit night. The bond of friendship between them had grown stronger with each passing day.

“It’s this, Derek. Finding the pearl fishery is of secondary importance to you. Finding your father comes first.”

“You know that, Biff.”

Charles Keene waited. He knew his nephew was cooking up a plan. He also knew that most of Biff’s plans had merit.

“Well, then,” Biff continued. “As I see it, we’re faced with two big problems. First, if we abandon our search for the pearl fishery, to devote all our time to looking for your father, then we give Dietz a wide-open field to try to find the fishery. That’s not good.”

“No, it isn’t, Biff. But I must find my father,” Derek replied earnestly.

“Very true, Biff,” Uncle Charlie said. “It’s quite a problem.” Charles Keene offered no suggestions. He was anxious to see how his nephew would attack the problem, what solution he might come up with.

“Uncle Charlie, a few moments ago you used the word ‘harassment.’ You said that would be the chief tactic used by Dietz to delay our locating the pearl fishery,” Biff said.

“He’ll double his efforts if I’m any judge. What’s on your mind?”

“If we can pull it off—” Biff was thinking out loud.

“Pull what off, Biff?” Derek asked.

“I’ve got a plan. I want to know what you and Uncle Charlie think of it.”

“Fire away, Biff,” his uncle invited.

“It’s this. Suppose tomorrow, we pretend to find the fishery. We’ll fire off guns. Blast off on the boat horn. Dance around the beach like mad. In full sight of Dietz, of course. Make him think we’ve located the site. Only, of course, we’ll do all this where we know there are no pearls. We’ll put on our act at one of the first places we tackled, before Dietz became so vigilant. What do you think?”

“You’ve got something there, Biff. I’m proud of you,” Biff’s uncle replied.

"It would be fun, too, to fool Dietz," Derek chimed in excitedly.

"To make it even more convincing," Biff went on, "we could break camp tomorrow afternoon. Pull out fast. Dietz wouldn't follow us immediately. Not until he'd done some diving and oyster shucking himself. He'd surely want to make certain we had located the fishery."

"You're darn right he would," Charles Keene said.

"That would give us a chance to get back to Trinité, slip out of town, and really concentrate on looking for your father."

Biff paused. He looked first at Derek. He felt sure Derek would be enthusiastic about his plan. Then he looked at his uncle. He knew his uncle was considering the plan in every detail.

Uncle Charlie finally spoke. "Well, Biff, I like your plan. You didn't know this, of course, but I was getting more and more worried about having you and Derek on the bottom of the ocean, with Dietz in his high-powered boat ready to strike at any moment. Calling off the pearl search for the time being makes a lot of sense."

"And maybe we'll find my father," Derek said.

"If he's on the island, we'll find him," Charles Keene said. He spoke with more conviction than he felt, to cheer the Dutch boy up. Privately, he had many doubts as to the possibility of finding Derek's father.

"Crunch go along. Help find lost white man."

It was the first time the giant Indian had spoken.

Biff shot a fast glance at his uncle. Charles Keene shook his head. The motion was barely noticeable. But Biff got it. He knew his uncle had some other plan for the Carib.

"I don't know, Crunch," Biff said. He knew the Indian wanted to remain in the party. "I think maybe my uncle has an idea where you could be a lot more help. Right, Uncle Charlie?"

Charles Keene turned to the Indian.

“If you want to be a big help to us, Crunch, it would be better for you to go back to Dietz.”

“No like Dietz. Bad man.”

“We know that, Crunch. But, while we’re gone—it will only be a few days—you can keep an eye on Dietz. You’d still be on our side, but Dietz wouldn’t know that. He’d think you were still working for him. You’d be our spy.”

“Crunch a spy?”

From the tone of the Indian’s voice, Biff could tell that Crunch was pleased. He liked the idea of being a spy.

“That’s right, Crunch,” Uncle Charlie continued. “You’d pretend to be still working for him, but you’d watch everything he did. He might even find the pearl fishery, and we’d surely want to know about that. Then, when we got back, you could tell us everything that had been going on. How about it?”

“Crunch do it. He go now.”

The Indian rose to his feet and faded into the night for his half-mile swim back to the island camp of the enemy. Biff wondered what kind of a reception he would receive from Dietz but felt sure Crunch could take care of himself.

The next morning the boys and Charles Keene were up at the first crack of dawn. Over a hasty breakfast, they went over their plan for the last time. As the sun boiled up out of the Atlantic, the three headed out to sea.

It wasn’t long before they saw Dietz’s boat come into sight, rocking above the horizon off their starboard side.

“Here we go,” Charles Keene said. “Drop anchor.”

Derek heaved the hook over. Biff was already donning his diving

apparatus. Derek was only a few moments behind as Biff slipped into the warm waters of the Caribbean and made his descent.

The boys stayed down for about half an hour. When they surfaced and climbed aboard, Biff cracked open an oyster. Immediately, he let out a shout and danced up and down.

Derek joined in the deception. Charlie Keene put his head together with the two boys, and for several moments they carefully inspected an imaginary pearl in Biff's empty hand.

They all knew Dietz was observing their actions through powerful binoculars.

With happy shouts that bounced across the waves and reached Dietz's boat, Biff and Derek plunged back into the water. They sent up several more baskets of oysters. When they surfaced and climbed back into the boat, they shucked a few more oysters. Then Charles Keene shook each boy's hand and clapped them on the back.

"Up anchor!" Charlie shouted. He started the motor. The boat raced back to the camp site.

"Look back over your shoulder, Uncle Charlie," Biff said.

Dietz had brought his boat into the area just abandoned by the boys and Uncle Charlie.

"Isn't he dropping a marking buoy right about where we were?" Biff asked.

"He sure is."

"Then we did fool him!" Derek sang out happily.

"For the time being, at least. But we've got to move fast. He'll be sampling oysters from that same bed as fast as he can."

The three struck camp quickly. They loaded their gear into the cabin cruiser. With a triumphant blast on the boat horn and a burst of shots from Charles Keene's gun, they pointed the bow of the cruiser toward

La Trinité.

They passed within a quarter of a mile of Dietz's boat. They could see Dietz hauling in lines holding the baskets of oysters which Specks had filled on the bottom. They didn't see Crunch. He must have been pressed into oyster diving also.

Ten minutes later, they could barely see Dietz's white boat bobbing on the blue water over the imaginary pearl bed.

"We pulled it off, Uncle Charlie," Biff said.

"That we did, Biffo me lad."

"And now we can hunt for my father," Derek added.

"And we'll find him, too!" Biff said confidently.

Charles Keene frowned. He erased the frown quickly, but not so fast that Biff missed it.

Biff knew his uncle believed that Brom Zook must have been lost at sea. The thought sent Biff's high spirits plunging downward.

Dashed Hopes

In La Trinité, Biff, his uncle, and Derek moved about with haste. Following a speedy lunch, they shopped for enough supplies to last them for their expedition into the interior of Martinique.

“Step lively, boys,” Uncle Charlie urged. “It won’t take Dietz long to find out he’s been fooled. And we don’t want him hounding us on this search.”

“Uncle Charlie,” Biff said, “if Dietz comes into Trinité and finds our boat still moored in Treasure Bay, won’t he know we’re still somewhere nearby?”

“That’s a chance we’ll have to take, Biff.”

“But if we took the boat up the coast—got it away from here—that would cause him further delay, wouldn’t it?”

“You’re right again, Biff.”

“But why would Dietz want to follow us when we’re searching for my father?” Derek asked.

“He wants to know about your father as much as we do. But for different reasons,” Charles Keene replied, a frown darkening his face.

Derek thought this over. “If we learn some bad news about my father—if we should learn he really is gone—” Derek gulped. He couldn’t bring himself to say out loud that they might find out that Brom Zook was dead. “If that is how our search should end, then you mean there could be some doubt as to whether the claim he originally filed is still valid?”

“Afraid so, Derek. I believe your claim would be supported in time. But there would be delay after delay as Dietz went to the courts to try

to have it invalidated.”

“I see.”

Biff wanted to get his friend Derek’s mind away from such depressing thoughts.

“About the boat again, Uncle Charlie. Why don’t we go around the point, head north along the coast, and find a sheltered harbor where we could hide the boat? Then we could head inland from there.”

“That’s what we’ll do, Biff. And let’s do it right away,” his uncle agreed.

They made a run of about ten miles along the east coast of Martinique and found a small cove between Ste. Marie and Marigot. They beached the boat and covered it with the lacy leaves of the giant fern trees which grow to a height of twenty feet on Martinique. Over the ferns they spread palm fronds. The boat was completely hidden.

From the beach, they could see the peak of Mt. Pelée, rising nearly five thousand feet in the air.

“Boys, what do you say we make Pelée our first goal?” Charles Keene suggested. “Your searches haven’t brought you that far north and east, have they, Derek?”

“No, sir.”

“Okay. Let’s move out then.”

Each of the three slung a pack over his shoulders, and they plunged into the thick tropical growth.

Biff was enjoying himself. If the object of their search hadn’t been such a serious one, if his feeling that the search might have an unhappy ending hadn’t been so strong, then the exploration would have been even more fun.

Martinique, Biff soon discovered, was truly a beautiful island, one of the most beautiful places in which he had ever been. From the top of

steep ridges, the lush, fertile valleys of the island spread out below. Rugged peaks rose like steeples above the ridges.

In the rich valleys, they crossed through sugar-cane fields.

Biff took his knife and slashed a stock down. Its sweet juices oozed out of the slash. Biff pressed the stock to his lips and sucked deeply.

“Try one, Derek. Tastes good,” he said.

Banana trees grew wild almost everywhere they went. Derek shinned up the rough, fat trunk of one tree and yanked down a bunch. He squirreled back down the tree and plopped on the ground to inspect his haul. Derek’s hands were exploring the bunch, trying to select the ripest, fattest banana when Charlie Keene leaped to his side and struck the Dutch boy’s arm a sharp blow.

Derek looked around in amazed alarm.

Charles Keene was stamping on a hairy black spider. He had spotted the ugly insect on Derek’s shoulder and with one swift blow had knocked the spider to the ground.

“What’s the matter, Mr. Keene?” Derek looked frightened.

“Close call, Derek. That spider I just knocked off your arm is called *matoutou falaise*. That’s the local French name for the most poisonous spider on the island. They make their nests in bananas.”

Derek’s face went white.

“It’s all right now. I got him. But after this, be mighty careful when you pick a banana,” Uncle Charlie warned.

Now and again the party would pass a small thatched hut. At each one, they asked questions of the inhabitants.

“A tall man, very thin, with almost white hair,” was the description they gave of Brom Zook. “He’s been missing over three months.”

The natives would only shake their heads. No, they had seen no such

man, nor had they heard of such a stranger in these parts.

For three days the party trudged up and down the ridges and peaks of the island. They questioned a hundred or more people. They went to Deux Choux, to Morne Vert, Le Lorrain, Grande Rivière, and towns even smaller. Nowhere did they get any leads to a missing Hollander named Brom Zook.

By the fourth day of the search, it was plain to Biff and his uncle that Derek was becoming more and more discouraged, more and more disheartened. They tried their best to cheer up the Dutch lad.

At the end of the day, they reached the top of Mt. Pelée. Looking down at the sea, they could pick out the ruins of Saint-Pierre. Once, Uncle Charlie told the boys, Saint-Pierre had been the largest city on the island. Then, in the early morning hours, tragedy had struck.

“You know the story about Saint-Pierre and Mt. Pelée, Biff?” Uncle Charlie asked. “You must have heard it, Derek, when you were growing up in Curaçao.”

Derek shook his head. “No, I don’t remember it, Mr. Keene.”

“It was just after the turn of the century, around 1902, I believe. Saint-Pierre then had a population of thirty thousand people. Early one morning, as the city slept, Mt. Pelée erupted. It shot forth a sheet of flame and molten lava. In a matter of only a few seconds, thirty thousand people were dead. Most of them died in their beds.”

“The whole city wiped out? In seconds?” Biff asked incredulously.

“That’s right, Biff,” Charlie Keene said. “There was only one survivor.”

“How could one person survive when thirty thousand others perished?” Biff demanded.

“It’s a most unusual story. This person was a prisoner in Saint-Pierre. He was in solitary confinement. The cell he was in had stone walls several feet thick. That’s what saved him. The walls were so thick they resisted the heat. The prisoner didn’t even know about the catastrophe until several days later when rescue crews explored the prison.”

Biff could only shake his head.

That night they camped on top of the volcano and went into Saint-Pierre the next morning. "As you can see," Uncle Charlie pointed out, "the town has been partly rebuilt. But today, only six thousand persons live here where, fifty years ago, Saint-Pierre had thirty thousand residents."

Inquiries were made at the police station. The three searchers could hardly believe their ears. They received their first lead.

"No, I do not know the man's name," the police officer said, "but a man of such a description as you give has been staying in a small pension just outside the city for the last few months."

"Where? Where is it?" Derek cried out.

"I will be only too happy to take you there," the courteous officer replied.

They rode through the volcanic ruins of Saint-Pierre toward the gentle slope that led toward Mt. Pelée. Although some sections had been built up, there were still plenty of signs of the savage destruction caused by Mt. Pelée's eruption over half a century before.

Derek was in the front seat with the police officer. Biff and Charles Keene were in the rear seat. Biff had his fingers crossed. Both the boy and his uncle were praying that the man the police officer referred to might be Derek's father.

The car drew up before a small vine-covered house. Derek leaped out. The police officer led the way. Biff and Charles Keene were right behind.

A broad veranda swept round three sides of the house. The officer made an inquiry, then motioned Derek to follow him.

Biff was a step behind Derek. At the far end of the veranda, they could see a man sitting in a high-backed wicker chair, his back to them.

As they approached the chair, Biff kept his eyes on Derek. The Dutch boy rushed forward and turned to confront the man in the chair. Biff watched the expression on Derek's face.

Biff read his answer from the disappointment which spread over his friend's features.

The man was not Brom Zook.

CHAPTER XXIII

Dietz Again

In the morning, the three breakfasted in silence. Biff wanted to say something to cheer up Derek. But what was there to say? Derek's face was white and drawn. It was plain to see that the Dutch boy had had little if any sleep the night before.

It was Derek who broke the silence.

"I want to thank you both," he said. "But I don't feel that I can ask you to continue this search any longer."

"We'll go along with you just as long as you want us to," Biff spoke up loyally. "Right, Uncle Charlie?"

"Certainly, Biff."

"No. It's no use," Derek continued. "Not in this section of Martinique. I'm sure that if my father were anywhere around here, we'd have heard something about it—some rumor, some tale of a tall white man."

"I agree with you there, Derek," Charles Keene said. "But there is much of Martinique still to be searched. The southern part, down around English Bay. That's south of the spot where we believe your father located the pearl fishery. He might have gone into hiding down that way."

"You mean, don't you, Mr. Keene," Derek said bravely, "that if he was lost at sea, and washed ashore, then it would be in that section of Martinique?"

Charles Keene didn't reply. Derek had read his thoughts.

Right after breakfast, the three headed back across Martinique toward the cove where they had hidden their boat. It was about a twenty-mile

trip, and they reached the spot just at dark.

"I think we'd better spend the night here," Uncle Charlie said. "I don't know this coast too well. Might run into a reef if we try to make it to Trinité tonight."

Exhausted from their long and fruitless search, the three slept that night under a clear sky, the sleep of the overtired. The sun was already up and blazing when they woke. A quick swim refreshed them after their hard sleep, and half an hour later they were on their way back down the coast.

They reached Trinité by midmorning.

After mooring the boat, they held a conference.

"What are your plans now, Derek?" Biff asked.

"Well, we could continue searching for the pearl fishery. Or—"

"Or we could go south and look for your father," Biff completed Derek's thought.

"What about this?" Uncle Charlie cut in. "Suppose Biff and I keep on looking for the pearls and you go off for a few days on your own?"

Biff frowned at these words. He knew his uncle's intentions were good, but he also felt that if Derek left them, he'd be cut off from the only friends he had on Martinique. He'd be lonely and engaged in a search with his heart heavy at the prospect of what he might discover.

Biff didn't quite know how to tell his uncle this. He didn't want to contradict him. He didn't have to. As he was puzzling a way out of the suggestion made by his uncle, he heard a shout. He looked in the direction the hail had come from. Lumbering down the dock, a broad grin on his strong face, came Crunch.

The giant Indian was delighted to rejoin Biff, his uncle, and Derek. Brilliant white teeth glinted in the sunlight as Crunch wore a perpetual grin on his face.

“What about Dietz?” Uncle Charlie asked.

“Did he locate the pearl fishery while we were gone?” Biff’s question tumbled out after his uncle’s.

“No find fishery,” Crunch said, still grinning. “Dietz look hard, though. Very mad when he find how you fool him.”

“Good,” Biff said. All of them smiled at his news.

“But Dietz do something else,” Crunch went on. “Him get some kind of paper from government.”

“What do you mean, Crunch? What sort of paper?” Charles Keene asked.

“Crunch not understand. Ask questions though. Paper say maybe you don’t find fishery very sudden, then claim no good any more.”

“How can that be, Uncle Charlie?” Biff asked.

“I don’t know, Biff. I’d have to see a copy of it.”

“Copy of paper nailed up in post office,” Crunch said.

“What are we waiting for, then? Let’s go!”

They leaped into a native taxi, urging the driver to speed and more speed. The taxi creaked and groaned, but it got them there.

In the post office the three read the copy of the document carefully.

“It’s not so good, is it, Uncle Charlie?” Biff asked.

“No, it isn’t.”

“I don’t quite understand it, Mr. Keene,” Derek said.

“Well, Derek, cutting through the legal phraseology, it comes down to this: Dietz went to Fort-de-France while we were searching for your father. He has challenged your right to the claim, on the grounds that you’re a minor. How old are you, Derek?”

"I'll be eighteen my next birthday."

"Well, what Dietz has obtained—in legal terms—is a temporary injunction. It goes into effect five days from now. At that time, the claim and the working permit will be suspended until the courts decide whether Derek is the rightful heir to the claim. I'm sorry, Derek," Charlie Keene said soberly, "but Dietz has obtained this injunction on the grounds that your father is deceased."

After a few moments silence, Biff spoke up. "We still have five days, then, to find the fishery. If we did, how would that affect the injunction?"

"Well, going back to the unwritten law of 'finders keepers,' Derek would have an excellent chance of retaining the rights, despite any court battle Dietz might put up."

"What do you say, Derek?" Biff asked. "Shall we go pearl diving again? I know you want to continue the search for your father, but—"

"I'm with you, Biff. It's only five days."

"And then, whether we find the fishery or not, we'll all continue looking for your father until the case comes up in court."

"One moment there, young fellow," Uncle Charlie cut in. "I'll continue with Derek. *You* won't be here."

"Won't be here!" Biff was amazed. "Where am I going to be?"

"On your way back to Indianapolis."

"Oh. School. I forgot." Biff's face fell.

"But we've got five days still. Let's make the most of them," said his uncle.

It took them two hours to restock their supplies, get air for the diving tanks, and return to the dock. At the end of the dock, lounging against a mooring post, was Dietz. He had an evil expression of triumph on his face.

“Don’t you ever give up?” he said.

Specks hovered behind him.

None of the three answered their enemy. They got into the boat and prepared to cast off.

“Hey? Come back here! Where do you think you’re going?”

Dietz’s startled question was directed at Crunch. Crunch had jumped into the boat with the others.

“Crunch go with friends. No work for bad man any more.”

“You’ll still be working for me!” Dietz shouted back in anger. “If you find the fishery, you’ll be finding it for me, because I’ll win it in court!”

Attack from the Deep

For the next three days, activity went on at a feverish pace. Camp was hastily set up again on the same island, and even when it was late in the day, Biff, Derek, and Uncle Charlie would try another spot hoping to locate the fishery.

They dived from sunup to sundown. The only rest period for Biff and Derek came when Uncle Charlie dashed into Trinité to replenish the air tanks.

The piles of shucked oyster shells grew higher and higher. No pearls were found. The boys worked desperately against time, but as the first day passed, then the second, then the third, they worked with heavy hearts. The time limit was drawing near.

Dietz made no further attacks. He was content now to fight his battle in the courts. But the pearl fishers knew he was still in the area. They saw his boat from time to time. He was keeping his distance, but he was still watching.

However, even by using binoculars, Dietz would be unable to determine whether the boys located the pearl fishery. He could only learn this by finding out the results of the daily diving. He would have to know what the opened oysters yielded. For this reason, a nightly guard was kept. Although Dietz was going to use the courts, the search party didn't want him to know if and when they did locate the fishery. Crunch insisted on taking the night guard duty. He also worked during the day. Biff often wondered when the big Indian slept.

Although the danger from Dietz had lessened, Charlie Keene kept reminding the boys of the danger that always awaited them when they were diving.

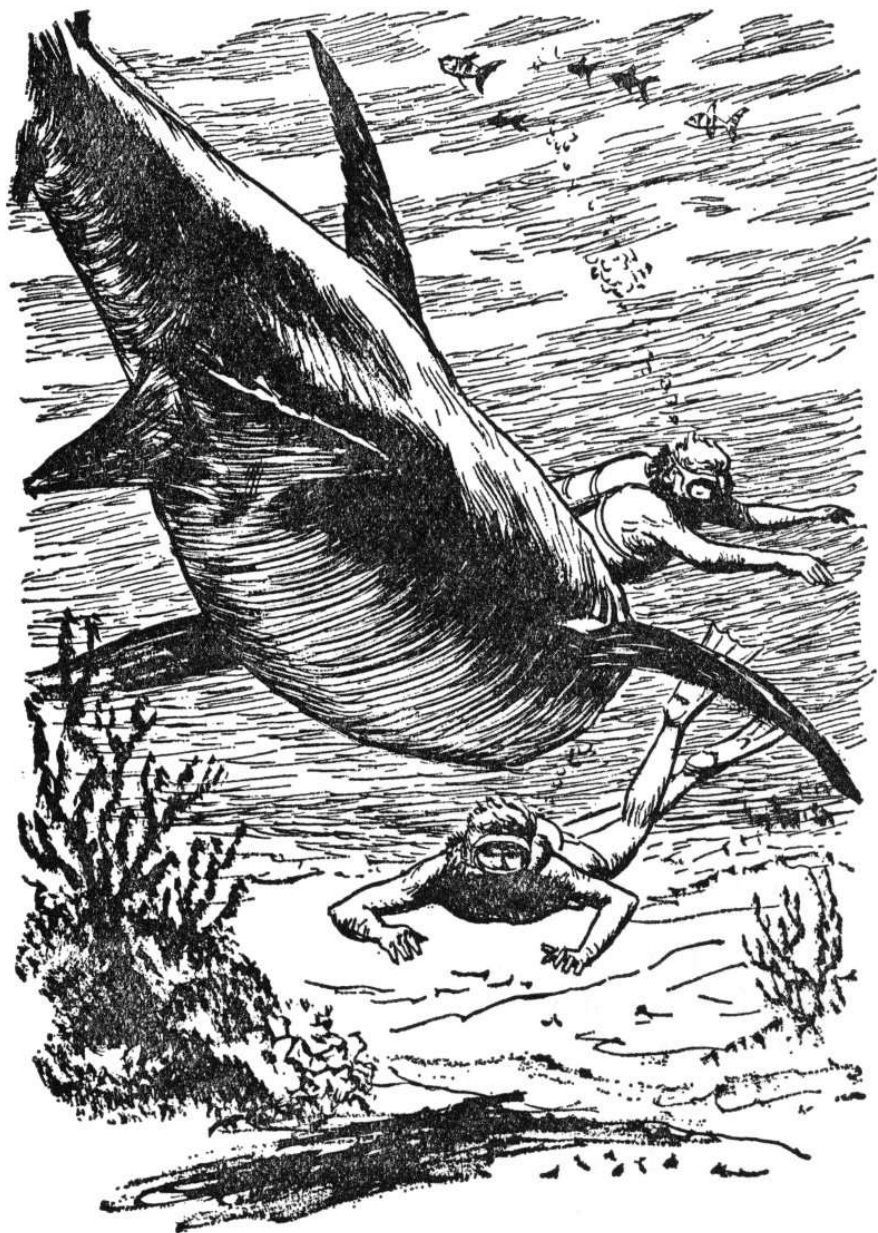
It struck suddenly and viciously on the fourth morning of their diving.

Biff and Derek were down in forty-eight feet of water. They had been digging out oysters for half an hour. Basket after basket had been hauled up.

Waiting for his basket to be lowered to him, Biff was suddenly spun around by a swirl of water. It felt as if he had been caught in a whirlpool. Biff cleared his mask. He looked around. Coming at him out of the murky dark waters was a giant shark. The killer swept by within a foot, then turned and slashed back.

Biff looked frantically for Derek. He saw his glimmering white shape ten feet away. Approaching Derek was a second shark.

The sharks hadn't struck yet. It seemed they were inspecting their prey, waiting before their razor-sharp teeth tore at the boys' bodies. Biff swam quickly over to Derek. He grabbed his arm and pointed. The two huge sharks were motionless, their wicked eyes on the boys.



Coming at him out of the murky dark waters was a giant shark

Biff took a deep breath, raised his mask just enough to clear his mouth, and shouted as loud as he could. His shout, of course, made no

sound. But Biff knew that the force of the breath expelled by his shout would send a shock wave in the direction of the sharks. He had read that this was one of the best ways of delaying an attack by an undersea monster.

The shout worked. The sharks swam around the boys in circles. But Biff knew that any second they would strike.

There was no time now to go by the book in getting to the surface. Biff jammed his face mask on, quickly cleared it of water, grabbed Derek by the arm, and shoved him upward. He himself followed, propelling himself as fast as he could. Both boys had jettisoned their belts instantly.

Breaking the surface, Biff gasped to his uncle, “Sharks!”

Charlie Keene lost no time. He grabbed Derek, who was closer, and hauled him into the boat. Crunch lifted Biff in.

They were no sooner in the boat than two shark fins cut the water, circling nearer and nearer to the craft.

Biff and Derek lay gasping on the bottom of the boat. Their rapid ascent had drained their bodies of oxygen and strength.

Biff’s uncle quickly started the motor and got away from the spot at full speed. He had seen the size of the sharks. They were big enough to overturn the dory if they struck.

By the time they reached the island camp, the boys had somewhat recovered. But Biff was still shaking as if he had a chill, and Derek’s face was drawn and white.

The narrow escape the boys had undergone was not without its reward, however.

All four of the pearl fishers—Crunch was now one of them—were shucking oysters after a rest and the noonday meal.

Biff, growing more and more bored with the tough job of opening and examining oysters, was about to discard a shell when he noticed a

raised protuberance in the exact center on the shell. He took off his glove and dug at the raised part with a fingernail. His excitement grew. Seconds later he dug out an almost perfectly shaped white pearl.

"I've got one! I've got one!" he shouted.

The others crowded around him. Biff handed the pearl to his uncle.

Charlie Keene inspected it carefully.

"I'm no expert, Biff. But the color, and particularly the shape, of this pearl—I'd say you've found a really valuable one."

"How much? How much is it worth?"

"I couldn't tell. Only an expert could. But it's a white pearl—they're the most valuable. And it's almost perfectly round. It could be worth several thousands of dollars."

"Whoopee!" Biff shouted. "Let me at more of those oysters!"

Interest quickened. The four worked in silence, but they worked fast. Oyster after oyster was opened, carefully inspected, then tossed aside.

Derek found the next one. It, too, was perfectly shaped, but slightly smaller than the one Biff had found.

It was Crunch who came through with the topper. A big grin on his face, Crunch came over to Biff and held out his huge hand. In the center of his palm was a pearl twice the size of those already found.

"This is it! This is it! Look at Crunch's pearl!"

Again they all crowded around. This was a real beauty. It didn't take an expert to know that Crunch had found a pearl of great value.

"Think we've found it, Uncle Charlie?" Biff asked. "I mean the fishery Derek's father discovered?"

"It could be, Biff. It darn well could be."

Biff looked at Derek. There was a smile on the Dutch boy's face. Then the smile disappeared.

"What's the matter, Derek?" Biff asked.

"My father found black pearls," Derek replied.

"They're all colors, Derek," Uncle Charlie told him. "Actually, the black ones aren't as valuable as the white. They're valuable, all right, especially if they're perfectly matched, as those two your father sent us were."

"I'd feel a lot more certain that we'd found the right place if we found some black ones."

"Let's go back down when we finish these oysters," Biff said.

"With all those sharks?"

"Funny thing about sharks," Uncle Charlie said. "Although they are the pearl diver's greatest enemy, they can also help produce the pearl."

"How?" Biff wanted to know.

"The best pearl is the perfectly round pearl. The foreign body which gets into the oyster must be perfectly round to produce the perfect pearl. These round objects are the eggs of parasitic worms. The adult worms are the parasites of sharks."

"So where you find sharks, you can find pearls?" Biff asked.

"Not exactly, Biff. What I mean is this: where there are pearl fisheries, the perfect pearls come from the eggs the shark's parasites lay."

No more pearls were found in the batch dug that morning. It was growing late in the afternoon. They decided to go back to the morning's site, and if no sharks were in evidence, they'd try half an hour's diving.

They returned to the same site. Biff and Derek went overside. Before

they started scooping up oysters, they made sure no sharks were around. Biff loaded one basket and sent it up. He saw Derek send one up. Biff filled another. He looked at his watch. They'd been down twenty minutes.

"One more basket," Biff said to himself, "and we'll call it a day." He turned in Derek's direction to signal to him that this was the last basket. Roiling water ahead pushed an alarm button in Biff's mind. He increased his speed.

Derek was being attacked savagely by giant band shells. They swarmed around him, slashing at him with their claw-shaped, horny shells.

Biff whipped out his knife and shot into action.

The giant band shells, many times the size of the ordinary conch shell, are the only known shell fish to attack human beings. They have a tough, scimitar-shaped muscle which they use as a door to close the opening at the large end of the shell. While other conches use this muscle only as a door, the giant band shell uses it as a weapon. The end of the muscle is hooked and razor sharp. The giant band shell springs at a man, using a second muscle to propel itself, then slashes and cuts with its "door." In moments, it can cut a man's body to shreds.

These giants were surrounding Derek. Up close, Biff could see Derek had already received several cuts. Biff knew what this meant. Sharks would come racing through the water, crazed with hunger by the smell of blood.

Biff slashed away at the band shells with his knife. It did no good. The giant shells continued their attack, some of them turning on Biff. There was only one thing to do. Derek was nearly helpless. Biff grabbed him. He shoved him upward with all his strength. Derek disappeared above him. Now the band shells turned their full attack on Biff. He fought them off, trying at the same time to rise. Several of them tried to fasten onto Biff's legs. He kicked out desperately. He thrust down with his open hands and shot upward. The slower moving band shells were left behind. Biff reached the surface. He lost

no time in scrambling into the boat. Uncle Charlie already had pulled Derek, bleeding, into the boat.

Biff just made it. No sooner was he in the boat than the waters around it boiled with maddened sharks, searching for the source of the blood.

A Double Find

Derek's cuts from the giant band shells were many but not deep ones. Biff and his uncle cleaned the cuts, treated them with a disinfectant, and put Derek to bed.

The Dutch boy was not seriously wounded, but he was suffering from shock. The thing to do, Biff knew, was to keep him warm and quiet. Charlie Keene gave Derek half a sleeping tablet, and the boy finally dozed off.

"What a day! Two narrow escapes. We should never have gone back," Charles Keene said. "You didn't tell me there were clam and conch shells in that bed."

"Didn't know they were dangerous," Biff replied.

"And just to see if we could find some black pearls," his uncle commented.

"Let's open the oysters we dug," Biff suggested. "Derek seems to be all right."

An hour later, Biff came back to the tent. Derek stirred restlessly in his sleep. Biff lighted a lamp Derek suddenly sat upright. Biff went to his side.

"You all right, Derek?" Biff asked.

"I—I guess so. I was dreaming. But—" Derek touched a bandaged cut gingerly. "Sure, I'm all right."

"This may make you feel even better."

Biff held out his hand. He thrust it under Derek's eyes. The hand held a black pearl.

The next morning, convinced they had located Brom Zook's fabulous pearl fishery, camp was broken. Gear was stored in the cabin cruiser. The tent was struck. By noon the four pearl searchers were back in La Trinité.

The party's happiness was mingled with sadness. One adventure was over. Derek's father's claim was safe. The quest had been successful. But Brom Zook, Derek's father, was still missing.

"I can't ask you to stay with me any longer," Derek said. "You've done more than enough for me."

"I'll stick with you as long as you want me to, Derek," Charlie Keene said.

"That goes for me, too, Derek," Biff added, hoping his uncle would not mention school. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to stay on in Martinique for a while. I'm going to every town and village on the island until I make as certain as possible my father isn't here. Then—then—" Derek stopped.

Biff knew what his friend was thinking. He knew that Derek would then have to come to the conclusion that his father had been lost at sea.

"What about you, Crunch? Where are you going?"

"Crunch go back up mountains. Stay with little brother for while."

“You found him? You didn’t tell us that!” Biff exclaimed.

“You too busy finding pearls. Crunch no want to bother you.”

“Well, we said we’d try to clear your brother. We still mean to do so, don’t we, Uncle Charlie?”

“We certainly do, Crunch.”

“You come with Crunch to talk to little brother?”

“You bet, Crunch,” Biff replied.

“Maybe Crunch can help Derek too,” the Indian said.

“How? What do you mean?” Biff demanded.

“Crunch maybe help Derek find father.”

Derek touched the Indian on the arm. “Anything you do will help, Crunch. But have you any clue?”

“Crunch not sure. Hear about white man up in mountain called Carbet.”

Derek grabbed the Indian by both shoulders and shook him. “Tell me! Tell me about the white man,” he urged.

“Little brother tell story. Little brother live in mountains, in small shack. Tell about sick white man. White man come to mountains two months, maybe three months, maybe more. Long time ago. Get very sick. Priests take white man in. Maybe your father.”

“Can we go there right now?” Derek asked excitedly.

“Take long time. Hard trip up mountains.”

They started out late that afternoon. Night overtook the party before their journey was half completed. Exhausted by the hard day and the excitement of Crunch’s clue, the first real one Derek had, all four slept in the open.

By midmorning the next day, they reached the shack where Crunch's brother Moti lived. Moti told the same story Crunch had told the day before.

"Is this place far from here?" Derek asked eagerly.

"One hour away," Moti replied.

From Moti's description of the place, Uncle Charlie came to the conclusion it was a small monastery.

Moti led them to it. A bearded monk took them inside. Derek babbled out the story of his search. The monk bowed his head.

"Please wait," he said.

The monk went down a long, narrow passage. He turned a corner and was out of sight.

Derek's heart was throbbing. Biff and his uncle were tense with hope.

Minutes passed. The shuffling of feet was heard. The monk was halfway back to the waiting group when another figure came into the passage. He was tall, gaunt, wasted by illness.

But there was a smile of happiness on his face.

Derek Zook raced down the passageway to meet his father.

* * * * *

Biff, his uncle, Derek, and his father were sitting in the patio of the Sans Souci. Hummingbirds darted in and out of the bougainvillea which poured over the terrace. It was the afternoon of the day after Brom Zook had been found.

Brom Zook's story was short. On the day he had mailed the letters and pearls to his son and to Charles Keene, he discovered he was being followed. He had thought it best to disappear into the hills until his claim could be filed and acted upon.

In the hills, he had become ill of a tropical fever. He had been found by a monk and carried to the monastery. There he had lain close to death for weeks, not knowing what was going on about him.

Only in the last two weeks had he come back to his senses. The monks had insisted that he stay with them until he was strong enough to travel.

"Well, I guess that about winds up my stay here in the Caribbean," Biff said. "I've got to get back to good old Indianapolis and school."

"We'll hate to see you go, Biff," Derek said. "Won't you come back and visit us?"

"Or maybe you could come to Indianapolis," Biff invited.

"I'd like to," Derek said eagerly.

"One more piece of business," Uncle Charlie cut in.

"What's that, Keene?" Brom Zook asked.

"I'd like to make sure that we found the same pearl fishery you discovered."

"Good idea." Brom Zook glanced at his watch. "I'm anxious to get back to Curaçao. Why don't you get everything ready, and the boys and I will take a run down the coast in the boat? They can show me their spot."

"Good. You ought to be back in a couple of hours. I'll find Crunch, and he can help me," Charlie said.

"What about Crunch, Uncle Charlie? Is he going back with us?"

"No, Biff. He's going to stay here until I send back word about his brother. I talked to Moti. I feel sure we can straighten things out in Curaçao."

"Tell Crunch and Moti they can count on that," Brom Zook said.

The run down the coast was a pleasant one. Biff steered the cruiser over the spot where they had located the pearls.

“Does this look like the place, sir?” Biff asked.

Brom Zook took a sight on an island to the cruiser’s portside.

“This is it, all right. And there should be thousands of dollars’ worth of pearls beneath us.”

As Biff, Derek, and his father were approaching the harbor in Baie du Trésor, they saw Dietz and Specks in their boat, heading in the direction of the pearl fishery.

“Won’t do them any good now,” Brom Zook said. “The injunction he obtained has been cancelled.”

They watched the boat until it was nearly out of sight.

“Look!” Derek shouted excitedly.

Brom Zook and Biff looked in the direction Derek was pointing. They saw the ugly, menacing clouds, forerunners of a *chabasco*.

“It’ll strike in a few moments,” Brom Zook said.

“And right at the spot we last saw Dietz,” Biff shouted. The winds were already getting heavier in the harbor.

“We can do nothing to help them. We’re too far away.” Derek’s father said soberly.

The *chabasco* struck. Dietz’s boat was right in the center of its fury. There was little chance that he and Specks would escape the storm’s vengeance.

A Biff Brewster Mystery Adventure
MYSTERY OF
THE CARIBBEAN PEARLS

By ANDY ADAMS

A mirror-image “twin” with a Continental accent, a pair of matched *black* pearls coveted by a sinister would-be claim-jumper, and a mammoth Carib Indian who refrains from crushing a man at the command of “voodoo” spirits confront Biff Brewster when he leaves his Indianapolis home to answer an urgent SOS from his uncle, Charles Keene.

Keene, on a trouble-shooting assignment in the Netherlands, Antilles, sends the SOS in a desperate, last-ditch attempt to save a valuable pearl fishery, belonging to his friend, Brom Zook, from being “staked” by thieves. Zook, who must prove his right to the pearl fishery claim within the set time limit, has mysteriously disappeared.

Biff and Derek, Brom Zook’s seventeen-year-old son, accidentally board the same plane in Miami and innocently exchange “identities” to play a joke. However, the joke backfires when Biff is kidnapped at the Willemstad Airport by the unscrupulous adventurers who want the pearl fishery.

But Biff, no stranger to mystery or challenging situations, uses his head and his courage at the crucial moments. His adventures in captivity, his use of “voodoo” to engineer escapes, his repeated changes of identity with his “twin,” Derek, their search for the lost pearl fishery and its rightful owner, and their final triumph over their adversaries are component parts of the tale told in *Mystery of the Caribbean Pearls*.

The
Bret King
MYSTERY STORIES

By DAN SCOTT

THE MYSTERY OF GHOST CANYON

Truck rustlers butcher cattle on Rimrock Ranch, confronting Bret with Western outlaws who combine thievery with science to outwit the law.

THE SECRET OF HERMIT'S PEAK

When a wild mountain lion and a gang of thieves invade Desolation Peak at the same time, Bret unlocks the fascinating secret of the mountain.

THE RANGE RODEO MYSTERY

From the moment the cow town of Tovar plans a revival of its colorful local rodeo, trouble stampedes Rimrock Ranch, until Bret outsmarts a band of big-time gangsters.

THE MYSTERY OF RAWHIDE GAP

Bret and his plane become involved in an international mix-up, uncovering a bizarre underground plot aimed at the federal government of the United States.

THE MYSTERY AT BLIZZARD MESA

The Navajo reservation is snowbound, and Bret King and his friends join the emergency airlift, only to run headfirst into treachery and skulduggery.

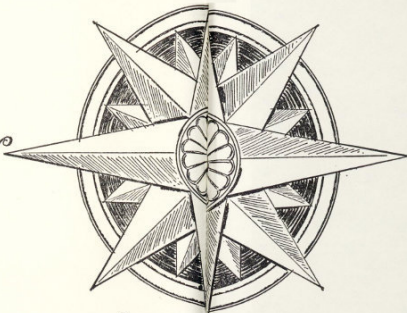
THE SECRET OF FORT PIONEER

Bret King and his friends become interested in a "jinxed" movie company which has been hampered by bad weather, bad tempers, and a series of sinister mishaps.

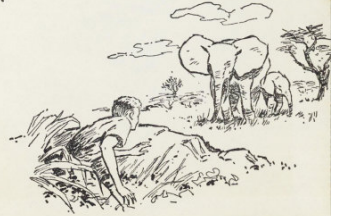
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